GETTING STRAIGHT

a novel by

KEN KOLB

GETTING STRAIGHT by KEN KOLB

In the atmosphere of protest and pot, which could well be that of the University of California, Harry, a young student teacher, works for his teaching degree, studies for his M.A., holds down a job in a department store, and aims to keep his best girl happy. This juggling act can lead only to hilarious chaos, the jangling clutter of life Harry would like somehow to "get straight." It is an almost impossible job, for his fellow students, especially his friends, are addicts, pacifists, artists, fanatics, compromisers, idealists – never just people studying. His teachers have lost touch in a different way, each being a pedant satanically hooked by his own kick. The people connected with the department store bring in another kind of madness, that of cutthroat commerce, and here too the novelist's satiric eye proves devastating.

In this twentieth-century American brand of a Rabelaisian world, Ken Kolb has given life to some marvelous characters. There's the three-hundred-pound girl teacher-to-be who is working her way through school by traveling around the

Continued on back flap

BOOKS-BY-MAIL
MAINE STATE LIBRARY
LMA BLDG STATION #64

#2
3.96
EB
1168

WITHDRAWN

GETTING STRAIGHT

GETTING STRAIGHT

KEN KOLB

CHILTON BOOKS
A Division of Chilton Company
Publishers
Philadelphia and New York

Copyright © 1967 by
Ken Kolb
First Edition
All Rights Reserved

Published in Philadelphia by Chilton Company
and simultaneously in Toronto, Canada,
by Ambassador Books, Ltd.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number
67-14173
Manufactured in the United States of America.

You may not believe this, but.....

none of the characters in this book is intended to represent the author or any person he has ever known. The incidents described are invented, not reported, though it is possible something like this may have happened to someone at some time or other. Life is so rich in odd coincidence that writers find it very hard to create stories devoid of similarity to the truth, or characters without some resemblance to real people.

GETTING STRAIGHT

I

Twenty minutes into Dr. Grumbacher's lecture on secondary education as socio-environmental integration, Harry had the idea he might pass himself off as the Bastard King of England. His barely legible notes covered only the first two lines of the page and ended with the words: "group dynamics as interpersonal reactions."

After all, why not be King? He was about the right age; his birth coincided with the courtship period of Edward and Wally, before the marriage and abdication. A child born to a king before renunciation of kingly authority would have a just claim, wouldn't it? Especially a son, since the title had passed to the female side with the death of George. The good old peasants always preferred a bastard king to a legitimate queen.

No doubt he could command a certain following, if he could just get his pretension into the newspapers. There are nuts waiting to take up any cause, follow any leader. Heroes are made of nasal adolescents with mushroom haircuts and dirty eyes. There was hardly any limit to what he might accomplish as the Bastard King. Bring a little class back to the fading tradition of royalty, for one thing. Down the Thames on the Bastardly Barge with five thousand musicians wailing Handel's Water Music and the R.A.F. cracking off a few sonic booms for emphasis.

There was only one drawback. He didn't really want to be King. He wanted, for reasons too square to utter, to be a teacher. So here he was.

The stir around him roused Harry from his daydream. Grumbacher was leaving the podium with his stiff, broken-doll walk, toting his immense briefcase. Every day he brought that damn briefcase to class, took a single sheet of paper from it and lectured from that sheet. Harry suspected it was the same sheet every day, for it was the same lecture. What was in the mysterious briefcase—Grumbacher's credentials? His documented proof that he was a Doctor of Education, entitled to spout drivel for an hour a day, five days a week?

"What did he say?" Harry asked the girl next to him. She had straight black hair and wore no makeup. A born algebra teacher, doomed to endure the giggles of boys making faces at her back as she wrote $x - y = z$ on the blackboard. Now and then her chalk would break, and she would scratch a fingernail on the board. She would never marry.

"Mid-term test next Tuesday," said the girl. She had covered two pages with neat and legible notes, and she glanced irritably at Harry's empty page. She hoped he would flunk, but he wouldn't. The test would be multiple-choice, marked with soft pencils in little squares, so it could be corrected by a machine. Anyone could guess the answers in a multiple-choice test, once he understood the official gibberish of Education, and the Golden Platitudes. The test was just one more low hurdle in the interminable, meaningless steeplechase toward the elusive credential.

"What the hell do you want with a teaching credential?" asked Nick Philbert over their coffee mugs in the cafeteria. "I thought you were hip, man."

"I'm tired of being hip," said Harry. "It's a limited kick."

Nick shrugged his eyebrows and lit a bent cigarette he extracted from his shirt pocket. Nick was no longer a grad student, but he still hung around the college, sitting in on the big lecture courses and drinking coffee in the cafeteria. At night he blew fair piano in a jazz group in an after-hours joint. Last year he had taken his bachelor's degree in philosophy, only to learn from the college placement service that philosophers were in oversupply with no demand uptrend in sight. The only place for philosophers was back in the classroom, so Nick had signed up as a grad student. But Plotinus gave

way to pot, and Hegel to H, and now Nick was a full-time hipster.

"I took an Education course once," he said, inhaling reminiscently.

"Good for you."

"From—you know, that big faggot, what's his name?"

"His name is legion."

Nick shook his head. "Naw, it's, uh, Willhunt—that's it. We had a dirty rhyme for his name. Used to write it on the blackboard before he came in."

"We have that same wit in our class."

"You take something from him?"

"The Unit Method of Organizational Structure in Teaching Technique."

Nick brightened. "That's what I had from him. . . . What the hell is that all about?"

"It's about Dr. Willhunt. His poise, his charm, his cleverness, and above all his mysterious allure in the eyes of women."

Nick coughed, shook his head, and stubbed out his cigarette. "He's so goddam queer he scares other fairies. No kidding, there was a cat in my class so geared I wouldn't sit near him, but after he listened to Willhunt for a while he started dating girls."

"Better pull down your sleeve. Your needle marks are showing."

Nick casually adjusted his turned-back cuffs, covering the inner bend of his elbow. "You want to fix up this afternoon? We can go out to the aquarium and dig the fish."

"No thanks."

"You've never seen fish before, man. Come on, try it."

"I'm afraid to take H. I might like it."

Nick frowned impatiently. "Don't come on so square. You make it on pot, don't you? I pinned you for a head, man."

"Used to be. I dropped out when they started wearing uniforms."

"Sometimes I don't dig you, Harry. What are you up to?"

"Just trying to get straight. You know, figure things out, find a way to go."

"Yeah, that's the kick. But—a teaching credential?"

"It's a drag, but there's no other way. They won't hire me without it."

"What will you teach?"

Harry smiled. "Don't you know Golden Platitude number one? 'We teach children, not subjects.'"

"Oh, yeah. I remember Willhunt saying that."

"They all say it. Grumbacher, Willhunt, Fleschie, Dobson—they all say it at least once a day. Sometimes I wonder what it means."

Nick looked at his watch. "You coming down to The Alley tonight? We got a new cat sitting in. Blows crazy flugelhorn."

"I don't think so. I'm taking Jan to a party."

"I'll bet she's a terrific lay."

Harry said nothing. Nick felt the silence and looked embarrassed. "Sorry, man. I didn't know you were serious about her."

"Who said I'm serious?"

"Pass," said Nick. "Hey, if you're interested, I can fix you up with this colored chick. She sings with the band sometimes. She likes to ball intellectual guys, especially white ones. She even let me do it after I showed her my degree."

"At last, a practical use for the diploma."

"How about it, you want me to set it up?"

Harry gathered up his books. "I'll think about it, Nick. It seems kind of cold-blooded."

"Where you going?"

"Visual Aids 24B. You know, posters, colored chalk, incentive games, all that jazz. Ten hours on how to thread a movie projector."

"I still think you should shoot up with me and look at the fish," said Nick. "You'd learn more."

2

At the end of eight weeks of class, the following entries were the sum of Harry's notes for Education 266B, the required course for all candidates for the secondary teaching credential:

ED. 266B—Prin. Sec. Educ. subtitle Educ. as Soc. Integ.—Dr Grumbacher. G moves like toy with broken spring. Voice old record Henry Burr. dearly beloved we are gathered here to teach teaching to teachers. 'response-building dynamics' etc. etc.
pretty girl in 4th row sits with legs apart. G sneaks peeks.
got it figured. G. warming up to deliver same old

GOLDEN PLATITUDES

1. We teach children, not subjects. (Cause we don't know the subjects.)

2. Learning is Socio-Environmental Integration. (I learns to be Them.)

3. We all Learn by Doing. (or as Einstein said, $E = mc^2$)

4. Learning must be made Enjoyable. (No biz like the teach biz.)

5. Life Adjustment is the Goal of Education. (I'm your life adjuster.)

6. Learning requires Motivation. (Show the donkey your carrot.)

7. Learning utilizes Life Experience. (All grist for the mill.)

8. Grades are an old-fashioned evil. (But parents keep asking.)

9. Any student can be Helped. (*Or, if Hitler had had Lincoln's teacher . . .*)

10. A teacher must be a Living Example. (*Quick, hide the bottle.*)

now go and sin no more

3

Harry watched Jan come down the steps of the office building and across the sidewalk to the car. He liked this moment; in the seconds before they met he could see her as strangers saw her, and this deepened his sense of pride in knowing she was his. *Mine,* he thought, denying the responsibility implied in that word.

She was thin and not quite medium height. Skinny in the arms, but perfectly formed legs, all lean muscle and smooth bone. So flat in the tummy that when she lay on her back the front edges of her pelvis made small hills under her white skin. He liked to trace these ranges with his finger, traverse the plain to the crater of her navel, which curved upward in a secret smile. Her round grey eyes were big and startling, like those in a child's drawing. Brown hair, long and glossy, brushed under in one simple sweeping curve. And a cool, sweet, virginal look which utterly denied her passion. Her days were spent translating articles from technical journals in French and German, work she found interesting, though underpaid.

They were always awkward with one another during the first few minutes, strangers from different worlds meeting. They spoke little, not forcing things, slowly letting their nearness reawaken the intimacy hidden in their bodies. They had a quiet dinner in an inexpensive Italian restaurant and reached the party around nine. The host was Pete Dalwin, a friend of Harry's from undergraduate days, now a medical student. The drink was grapefruit juice blended half and half with lab alky, two hundred proof.

They had hardly dumped their coats on the bed and been handed a glass of juice when they were seized by Max Woburn, the atheist missionary. Max had been eagerly awaiting Harry's arrival, for he suspected Harry of believing in God. For this he cordially hated Harry, though otherwise he felt obliged to admire his intelligence. Max could not—simply *could not* make himself swallow all that bilge about God and Christianity, and it enraged him that others could. What right had they to derive comfort or hope from the barefaced lies of the Bible? Max was determined to become a psychiatrist, to free people of their false happiness, so this year he was forced to study anatomy and dissect cadavers. Better than last year, when he dissected frogs, but not as good as next year, when he would be allowed to witness dissections of live people. Somewhere far ahead, at the end of the rainbow, lay that happy day when he would sit listening sagely to some psychotic Southern Baptist revealing the syndromes learned at his dear old mammy's knee. Then, *then* Max could look at his diploma on the wall, revile God with authority, and forget all about medicine.

Max was already launched on a brilliant harangue, his text the impossibility of getting all those goddam animals on the ark. He gestured freely with the quart bottle of beer clutched in his left hand. It was Max's boast that he never drank hard liquor. His average at parties was six quarts of beer, and his hangovers were bowel deep.

Harry enjoyed listening to Max and being the angels' advocate. He wished he could help Max, for it was obvious Max desperately wanted to believe in God. That was why he started all these violent arguments; he had the unquenchable unrecognized hope that someday he would run up against someone more brilliantly polemical than himself and would be converted on the spot. Max's wife had a child by a former marriage, yet she had failed to conceive during three years of trying with Max. It was his secret fear that this was God's punishment of him for being an incurable atheist.

"So what did Noah do? Get out his goddam microscope and take two each of every amoeba? Did he search the oxen to be sure they had exactly one flea of each sex?"

Harry took a long sip of his grapefruit. It left a slightly clinical taste in his mouth, evoking memories of a childhood operation for appendicitis. "I give up, Max. Noah was a fraud. He probably made

up the whole story himself just to explain that crazy boat sitting in his back yard."

Max released a long gassy beer burp that stung his nose and watered his eyes. Before he could recover for a new attack, Harry had excused himself and drifted into the next room, for he saw Jan talking to a tall young man with a Kirk Douglas dimple. Focusing his ears intently, Harry heard, ". . . gram negative . . . ion reaction . . ." and tuned out with relief, jealousy subsiding. She was in her mysterious technical world, and welcome to it. Looking at her, he again saw a stranger. What little he knew of her puzzled him. She would lie for hours on her stomach listening to Bartók's violin concerto, eyes blank. Bartók grated on him; he needed Bach. They were so unlike, why this burning urgency to merge their bodies?

Harry found his host in the kitchen opening more beers for the non-serious drinkers. Pete was a balding, happy, irrepressible soul who had plans to become a neurosurgeon and confound the TV image. "Hi, old scort," he said. "How's the latest?" He often amalgamated words or phrases when the alternatives seemed equal. "I saw you had a drink and Max talking, so I figured that was enough."

"It was plenty. Why don't you put some alky in his beer? Save him all that gastric acidity."

Pete shook his head. "He'd taste it and get mad. He took a vow not to drink, except beer, which is a food, not liquor. Give me a help to carry these in, will you?"

Harry carried beers to couples in the back bedroom, then left Pete to his host chores and drifted back to the living room. Bits of conversation floated out of the general noise, the clichés of medical shop talk:

"Really got a steatopygous ass on her."

"Dunno why, he just went sour and croaked. Barnes thinks it was potassium imbalance, but wait'll the autopsy."

"—clean up into the Fallopian tubes."

"—but why be a gynecologist? I like fishing, too, but I don't wanta work on a tuna boat."

"Hell of a plastic surgery job, making a whole woman out of one rib!" That was Max, who had Bob Oates plastered up against the brick fireplace, giving him the word. Oates was a big, slow, mus-

tached High Episcopalian. A born geriatrician, he was growing old gracefully in his mid-twenties so as to have the right bedside technique for his elderly, well-to-do patients. He said something inaudible to Max in his refined, well-modulated voice, and Max gave a sarcastic laugh, turning away. Another infidel annihilated. He spotted Harry moving toward the hallway and neatly cut him off, calling, "Ho, Barabbas! Who's that beatnik with you?"

"How come you don't drink hard liquor, Max?" asked Harry, trying to turn the conversation.

Max hiccuped gently. "Same reason I don't eat fried foods."

"Because they make you drunk?"

"Not healthy. Cholesterol hardens the arteries—to simplify the issue into layman's terms. Alcohol atrophies the liver. Cirrhosis. So if there really is a God, why do we get cirrhosis, that's the real question, isn't it?"

"Yes, simplified into layman's terms, that is the question."

"So what's the answer? I suppose 'God didn't intend for us to soak our livers in alcohol.' So what *did* he intend?"

"I don't think of God in terms of intention," said Harry.

"Aha! So you *do* believe in God," cried Max, scoring a victory.

"I believe in hunger, too. And sex."

"You slippery bastard, don't try to switch me onto sex. That might work with these other maniacs, but I understand logic. We're talking about God!"

"Okay. What made people build those cathedrals all over Europe for the last fifteen centuries?"

"Sheer idiocy."

"All right, call it that. But by any name, some need guided people to erect architectural marvels and paint pictures and write music and perform rituals. They call it God, you call it idiocy, but the results are real and tangible. There's a motivating force there."

"That's all God is? Some need in man?"

"Would you prefer a grey-bearded old man up in the sky, whose hobby is giving boils to Job?"

"Don't get tricky with me, goddam it. You admitted you believe in God. So what is he?"

Harry tipped up his glass and finished off his grapefruit and alky.

"Among other things," he said, "God is the urge to be tolerant of some poor sonofabitch like you."

Max blinked twice, three times, staring straight at Harry. "That's the first intelligent answer I've ever had to my question," he said sarcastically. "I hereby declare you the new Pope." He waved his empty beer bottle as an excuse and moved off toward the kitchen.

Harry found Jan in the front bedroom with a crowd of med students and girl friends. A skinny youth was stretched out on the floor with his coat off and shirt unbuttoned. One of the med students was over him, listening with a stethoscope. "It's true, his heart is on the right side!" Others crowded around to listen, and the skinny youth lay there with a smug expression of accomplishment. Harry moved up behind Jan and put his hands on her shoulders. She turned, and her hair tickled his cheek.

"I'd like to listen to your heart, miss. Without instruments."

She showed a dimple on just the left side when she smiled. "I think that could be arranged."

"Let's leave about midnight, all right?"

She nodded. Her wide grey eyes met his directly for a moment, and they exchanged a look of secret pleasure. Harry laughed inwardly. How could there not be a God?

At his elbow Max said, "I hear you wanta be a teacher." He tipped up a fresh quart of beer and four bubbles broke within the amber while Harry tried to think of a clever answer and failed.

"Yeah, that's right."

"How come?"

"Well, I figured I wasn't smart enough to make it through med school, Max. The rest of us have to get by somehow."

Jan had drifted away from them, and Harry watched her departure sadly. Max, with lizard-slit eyes, watched Harry.

"You're all mixed up inside, kid. You ought to see a psychiatrist."

"I'll wait till you're ordained, Max."

"You won't last till then." His certainty was jarring. "You think it's God, but it's just a hard-on. You got a nice little thing going, you get a good piece now and then, you're full of divine love. Ahhh, don't bother to deny it, I got eyes." He swigged a quick one. "But just wait, buddy. You got surprises coming. You'll bust up like an egg-

shell. Some day. No job, no nice little tail—then you come and tell me about God." He chuckled, laughed, coughed.

Harry placed a hand gently on Max's shoulder. "Thanks, doc. It sure has been a comfort, talking to you."

At twenty past twelve they closed the door of Harry's apartment behind them and stood leaning against the wall of the hallway, locked in a tight, hot embrace. They didn't bother to turn on a light, and by the time they worked their way along the hall and through the door to the bed they had somehow struggled out of their clothes, wriggling and pulling at the cloth caught between them as though it were an enemy trying to keep them apart. Harry's hand caressed the tiny hollow where her spine entered the cleft of her small firm buttocks, and she arched her pelvis against him, shuddering.

But while he was almost totally lost in the pleasure of her, that incurable thinker kept at it, wondering in deplorable language if this nice little piece of tail stirring up his hot juices was all that sustained his hope of God. But how could that be? For God is love; everybody who can read knows that. You see it chalked on rocks beside the highway and embroidered under glass in your old auntie's house. Now her warm legs wrapping around him were a delight and wonder to make him moan aloud, but that couldn't be God because it wasn't love. He didn't really love her. Sad, sad it was, but he knew enough to admit it. He was determined not to deceive himself.

But oh. Oh. Oh my God.

4

Dr. Willhunt spread his beautiful hands and examined his fingernails with pride. They were pink, perfectly manicured, free of cuticle, each showing a small half-moon at the base. There was just the hint of an incipient hangnail on the ring finger of the right hand, but he could trim that up neatly as soon as he got rid of this troublemaker.

"Now just what is it that seems to be troubling you?" he asked, hearing with satisfaction the proper blend of sympathy and firmness in his richly modulated voice.

Harry winced. Well, just what was it that seemed to be bothering him? Speak up, you dumb bastard, here's the chance of a lifetime. Get it off your chest. Well, first of all, that Big Bomb sitting there in the background is bothersome, especially when mad-dog McNamara starts blowing about our ability to destroy most of the world in spite of a hundred million casualties at home. It's mildly unsettling to know that every day may be your last. Anything else? Oh, yes, a few little things. Cancer is a nuisance, and so are heart attacks, cirrhosis, multiple sclerosis and leukemia—all of which are easy to contract while lying awake in the dead of night. Insanity is a bother, along with race prejudice, greed, and general stupidity. Every newspaper he saw bothered him, from the Vietnam headline right down through the fires, floods, rapes and murders to the job-wanted classifieds. It really bothered him that although he had earnestly read the Bhagavad-Gita, the Glorious Koran, the Old and New Testaments,

The Way of Zen, and even J. D. Salinger he was still not an enlightened man, and had no clue on how to proceed along the elusive path to fulfillment. Most of all—right at this moment—it bugged the hell out of him that this effeminate egomaniac with the glowing pink skin was being sympathetic (but firm) with him because he had popped off in class about this gigantic waste of time called an Education Course.

"I'm waiting," said Dr. Willhunt gently, with a delicate hint of sarcasm. His tone implied that while he had time to mark the fall of the littlest sparrow, the President and First Lady were impatiently expecting his company.

"It's what I said in class. We're not learning a damn thing about teaching English to high school students," said Harry abruptly.

Dr. Willhunt closed his eyes and allowed them to remain closed for several seconds. He had been unable to study his appearance in the mirror with his eyes closed, but he had tried closing one eye at a time, and it seemed that with both eyes closed he would have a very wise, patient, long-suffering expression. "I fear you have not been listening carefully," he said.

A fog of depression settled over Harry. He should have known better. He *did* know better, and he had tried to keep his peace, suffer through this crap, and go his own way as a teacher. But the class was full of people who couldn't write a simple declarative sentence, and Willhunt was going to let them loose on the world to teach our beloved language.

"I've tried to make sense of the course," said Harry. "But all I've heard is a lot of jazz about Units. Just what is a Unit?"

Dr. Willhunt felt like the Bishop whose curate asks him just what is a Commandment. "A Unit," he said icily, "is the organization structure of presentation of study material. A normal semester usually involves three to five organizational Units, each carefully preplanned by the teacher and amplified by the students. In exceptional cases, where student interest is fully aroused in the Unit, the Unit may present an adequate base for an entire semester's teaching."

"I've heard all that," said Harry. "What does it mean?"

Dr. Willhunt decided to use his retarded-child approach. "To take the simplest possible example, you might begin your English class

with a Unit on Racial Tolerance. The children would be urged to clip newspaper articles dealing with various aspects of racial tolerance. Certain of these articles might be read in class, and class discussion might follow. Little one-page essays might be requested, asking the views of students on the question of racial tolerance. The class might listen to radio or television broadcasts bearing on this question and then discuss whether they were in agreement. If at all possible, a field trip through a minority housing district might be planned, and class observation called forth in essay form."

"That's all fine, but it isn't teaching English," said Harry.

"But my dear boy, don't you see? You are *using* the language in every stage of the teaching Unit. The class discussions, the little essays, the newspaper articles, the teevee broadcasts—all these involve the active, everyday use of the English language."

"The everyday use of the language is appalling," said Harry. "How can students learn anything from the degraded pidgin that swamps us through newspapers and television? We may as well take them on a field trip to a whorehouse for an intellectual chat."

"You are obviously attempting to be facetious."

"I'm sorry. It's no joking matter. Are we learning to teach English or Social Problems?"

"Both, in a way. You see, English is deadly dull—shall and will, could and should—possibly you recall those stupid drills from the dark ages of your own high school career. The modern way is to keep the student *interested.* In which case the teaching of the language can be inserted almost unnoticed, painlessly."

"Like a suppository into an unconscious patient."

"Your gift for metaphor may possibly be wasted in the teaching profession," said Dr. Willhunt with a meaningful frown. "Perhaps you are incapable of accepting the disciplines of the profession."

Harry understood the threat very clearly. He forced a note of humility into his voice. "I don't mean to be impolite. But to me English isn't a dull subject, it's interesting and important. I don't want to see it slighted for the sake of subjects that are covered in other classes."

Dr. Willhunt was not mollified. "You should realize that your zeal may be misdirected. I have been teaching Education 216B for five years now. Presumably I have a fair grasp of the curriculum."

Five years, thought Harry. The harm this man has done! But he

said, "All right, I'll try to understand the Unit System. No doubt there are advantages to using it."

Dr. Willhunt opened his desk drawer and slid out the tiny silver manicure scissors always kept there. "Very well. And in the future, confine your classroom remarks to a more constructive approach." He dismissed Harry with a nod, then caught him at the door with a parting shot. "I'll be considering your assignment as a practice-teacher. As you know, there are certain high schools which present *difficult* environmental situations. I hope you'll be spared such an assignment."

You miserable prick, yelled Harry, but not a sound escaped through his thin smile. As he closed the door he could see Willhunt delicately probing at his ring finger with the manicure scissors.

Alone with his thoughts, Dr. Willhunt could not repress a sweet spontaneous smile. He had wondered who it would be this year. In every class there was some dedicated know-it-all who suddenly sprang up and gave words to the vague and unformed discontents of the young minds being carefully shaped by his disciplines.

How surprised they always looked when their fingers were sharply rapped with the ruler! How quickly they indicated a willingness to see the light. As though that would excuse their insubordination. These little rebels had no idea of their own usefulness; they served a higher purpose than they knew. This Harry fellow had crystallized and personified all the subtle cross-currents of opposition. When Harry was slowly and publicly crushed, the class would learn a great lesson. Dr. Willhunt indulged in the pleasure of anticipation.

5

Harry's classmates were the usual assortment found trapped in any College of Education. About one-third were newly commissioned Bachelors of Arts, youthful and idealistic, certain of their calling. Another third were repatriates from the wars of life, veterans scarred by two to five years of commercial skirmishing, seeking now a way of life offering rewards not measured in dollars. The remainder were the refugees, the derelict scholars and would-be writers, the bored and neglected spouses, all of those fleeing into teaching as the last refuge of the incompetent. And a few unclassifiables—such as Rachel Fanning.

She had begun a casual conversation in the college bookstore with Harry, and soon he found himself having coffee with her between classes. It was much easier to go along with her than to oppose her. She weighed just a shade over three hundred pounds, yet she was not obese. Big, stout, compact, muscular—but organized fat, not the shaking jelly of obesity. Rachel's husband Roscoe outweighed her by about twenty pounds; it was a marriage made in heaven. She had once confided that on their honeymoon she and Roscoe had broken six beds, possibly a new world record.

"Why do you want to be a teacher?" Harry asked her on this day as they waited for Dr. Fleschie to arrive and deliver his lecture on the administrative structure of the secondary school.

"I don't," said Rachel. "I bet Roscoe I could get a credential before he could get his real estate broker's license."

"Why does Roscoe want to be a real estate broker?"

"He doesn't."

"Ah, I see."

Dr. Fleschie entered and stormed the podium. Each day he attacked and captured the podium, then gazed about in regal splendor from this bastion. Long ago plain *Mister* Fleschie had taught high schoolers about Pub. Spk. and Dram., but he had aspired to higher things. There being no doctoral degree in Pub. Spk. and Dram., plain Mr Fleschie had to become a Doctor of Education. Now only his rounded tones and florid manner, reminiscent of Barrymore well past his prime, remained of Dr. Fleschie's former knowledge. But he intoned the chain of command from Superintendent of Public Instruction down through student-teacher as though it were Polonius' advice to Laertes.

Today's lecture concerned attendance records. The inception of the attendance record; its importance as a tool of analysis *re* student progress; its value in parent-teacher relationships; its value to the school administration; and so on, theme and variation, a fugue without content, hypnotically soporific. Rachel took rapid notes in a small, precise hand. Harry drew a page of tangential circles containing lopsided triangles, a doodle which showed he had a strong sense of order and a feeling for beauty, according to the Sunday Supplement. Before an enlightened journalism made him aware of this high-status doodle, Harry had drawn endless tangles which resembled pubic hair. He also loosened one shoe and scratched his athlete's foot, a lingering memento of his two-year hitch in the Navy. The Navy pharmacists had painted his feet a variety of pleasing shades, but the disease survived to endure civilian salves and powders. Possibly he could make medical history by being the first man to die of athlete's foot. A grotesque fate for the Bastard King of England.

Dr. Fleschie finished delineating the rules governing attendance records, as graven upon the golden tablets and passed down to him. Then he departed the podium and the stage: *Exeunt, with a flourish of trumpets.* Rachel folded her notebook and turned to Harry.

"You want to make some money?"

"You've been reading my mind."

"This takes a little explanation. I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea."

"I've already got the wrong idea. Give me the right one."

"Wellll—it's legal. We go in partners, fifty-fifty. We can each put up a hundred dollars, but you'll have that back in two weeks."

"I suppose I could get a hundred dollars for two weeks. What are we buying with our money?"

"Clothing. Specialty items."

"Who do we sell it to?"

Rachel busied herself with her books as she talked. "Well, we travel around. Roscoe says we can use our station wagon, at least until we can make enough to buy a business car. But we should have that much in a few months. We should clear about five hundred a month each."

"What about our classes? Are you giving up?"

"Oh, we can still go to school. We can travel on Saturday, and maybe one afternoon a week."

"That sounds like good money for so little work."

"It's easy, really. If we exercise a little common sense."

Harry studied her. "Look, you may as well tell me. If I'm going to travel around with you selling something, I'm bound to find out what I'm doing." Harry paused. "What kind of clothing?"

"Like I said, specialty items. You know—stuff that comes off easy. Bras, panties, nightgowns—stuff like that." Rachel looked closely to see Harry's reaction, but saw nothing. "It's really good merchandise. I've seen the whole line. Just one snap and off it comes. You can't buy those things in stores."

"I'll take your word."

Rachel was warming to the sales pitch now. "There are about two hundred whorehouses in this area—that is, within a fifty-mile drive. We can cover—say, twenty a week. The merchandise carries a fantastic markup, and it'll sell, believe me."

"You're not kidding, are you?"

"Of course not," she said indignantly. "Listen, Harry, I've seen this stuff. They've got a sequined bra with the nipples cut out that retails for five-ninety-five. It costs us a dollar. You don't have to sell many of those in a week."

"I'm glad. I'd hardly know how to start."

"You don't have to worry about that. I'll do the selling."

"And the modeling?"

Rachel laughed. "If I have to. All you have to do is drive the car, load and unload the merchandise. We'll make *money,* Harry."

"How about Roscoe? Why doesn't he drive the car?"

"He can't. He's busy building bridges." Roscoe made expensive dentures. "Besides, he's afraid of getting arrested."

Harry nodded. "So am I."

"Don't be silly. There's no danger—unless we get caught in an accidental raid, and then we'd only be booked as customers. There's nothing illegal about selling clothes—even to whores."

Harry tried to visualize himself driving around every Saturday, the car full of Rachel Fanning and cases of lewd underwear. He tried to imagine staggering up the brothel steps bearing boxes of e-z-off panties. On the other hand, he could imagine five hundred a month. Oh, how he could imagine it.

"Well, how about it? We can start next Saturday. The manufacturer is just waiting for me to call him."

"I don't know, Rachel . . . if we got caught, the State Board would shit a brick."

Rachel looked at him, puzzled. "You mean you're really planning to teach?"

"I didn't make any bet with Roscoe. I'm trying to find a profession in life, goddammit!"

Rachel was momentarily silent, actually at a loss for once. "That's funny," she said at last. "It never occurred to me that you might go through with it. Teaching, I mean."

"Is that so illogical?"

"But you seem so intelligent." She stopped and made a dissatisfied gesture. Then she took a new tack. "What will you teach?"

"Students," said Harry blandly. "Don't you listen?"

"None of that crap. I'm serious. I really want to know why somebody like you wants to teach—and what?"

Harry felt a sudden weariness and depression. He took a deep breath, an act which was becoming a habit lately. "I'll teach English—the language and the literature, God willing."

"But why?"

"Perhaps in the hope that a few young minds will not grow up thinking great art means the adventures of Batman and Robin."

Intellectual discussions were too deep for Rachel, but she knew when the moment to do business had passed. Her large brown expressive cow eyes looked sadly at Harry. "You think that's more important than an easy five hundred a month?"

"I guess I do think so. Maybe I'm being a sucker—or maybe I'm just a coward. But you'd better get somebody else, Rachel."

"I understand," she said, not understanding.

Harry smiled at her. "Thanks for the offer anyhow. Give my love to the girls."

6

Dr. Kasper lived in the firm belief that he was the reincarnated spirit of Samuel Johnson. He loved to tell his classes about the great Dr. Johnson's reaction to the publishing of Bishop Berkeley's thesis that the world exists only as a set of human perceptions, that Reality is only a reflection of Mind. "Thus I refute him!" cried Johnson, kicking a table leg in his favorite tavern. Had the furniture been his own, empiricism might never have survived. Dr. Kasper had worn out several lecterns with his vigorous kicks illustrating the anecdote. He was not by nature a hearty trencherman, but he gorged himself at every meal to maintain the portly figure and choleric facial expression characteristic of the lexicographer.

In Harry, Dr. Kasper had found a protégé, a Boswell. It all began when Kasper quoted a couplet by Alexander Pope and Harry responded with an apt line from Dryden. The immediate upshot had been that Kasper invited Harry to be his teaching assistant, grading papers for the course in Eighteenth Century Literature. Needing both the money and a faculty benefactor, Harry accepted. Now they occupied opposite ends of Kasper's tiny office, each facing a plasterboard wall over the inevitable square desk of varnished wood the color of stale beer. The atmosphere was that soporific mixture of old paper, dust, and steel filing cabinets so dear to any teacher's heart.

Harry picked up the next test paper and read: "Alexander Pope wrote, The propper study of Mankind is men. What he meant, was . . ." Harry scratched a red C— at the top corner of the paper and shoved it aside. His conscience nagged, but he throttled it.

A lifetime of test papers stretched before him in his mind, and the weight on his chest made him take the deep breath again. In a million test papers he could look forward to, say, a dozen of those howlingly funny errors the Reader's Digest loves to print between the articles attacking venereal disease and those glorifying reactionary politicians. Some day, when he was Kasper's age, he would be plodding through the latest batch and beneath his glazing eye would come the words: "Byron and Kelley and Sheats were all Learic poets." And he would chuckle so hard the pipe ashes would spill down his vest, and he would save the paper to show to his colleagues at the faculty club, like a pearl found in a dinner oyster. Was it for this he had lain awake nights, as a boy, tingling with hopes of the future?

"There is now less flogging in our great schools than formerly," roared Dr. Kasper abruptly, "but then less is learned there; so what the boys gain at one end, they lose at the other."

"You tell 'em, Sam," said Harry.

Kasper's swivel chair squeaked ponderously, and Harry could feel Kasper's slightly exophthalmic eyes probing his back.

"Are you sick, sir—or are you sullen?" quoted Kasper. The nice thing about being Samuel Johnson was that he said so much. A whole lifetime's clever conversation was cut, dried, and hung in strips in Kasper's mind. It undoubtedly solved a lot of problems, this being someone else. Especially being the Grand Cham of another century.

Harry turned his chair, holding up the test papers. "Sir, what is written without wisdom is read without pleasure," he intoned.

Kasper laughed, his paunch shaking. A Johnson quote need not be funny to amuse him. "I hope you weren't too harsh on the little dears," he said. In the beginning, Harry had unreasonably expected the students to understand what they had read. It is a hard lesson for the new teacher, learning that the backbone of the class, the C's, plus and minus, will inevitably be those who can show they have plodded through the assigned works to the bitter end. The least shadow of comprehension deserves at least a B.

"I was generous," said Harry. "I gave A's to every paper without gross spelling errors."

"Which made how many?"

"Three."

"I worry about you, Harry. How do you expect to survive in a mere high school, where the students are really stupid? Here you have the very cream of the crop."

Harry considered. "Maybe I should take a job selling transparent shifts to bawdy houses."

"An intriguing idea—but I have a better one. There's a teaching fellowship open for next semester, here in the English department."

"You think I could get it?"

"I'd recommend you. And I do have some small influence in the department." Kasper's fingertips met in approbation over his leather vest. He also affected a large gold watch chain.

"Where would it lead?"

"To the Ph.D. eventually. And a permanent position with the faculty, if you do well, as I'm certain you will."

"I don't even know Latin."

"You can learn it in two years—enough, at least, to pass the exam. And you can opt for either German or Old English."

"Plus another two years of specialization in a certain century, plus the thesis—say six years at least, with a teaching load."

Kasper smiled paternally. "Six years seems an inordinately long time at your age. It does not seem so at mine."

More fool you, thought Harry. I dread the day when six years is nothing. Six years, to be called Doctor, to be entitled to bore your students and be thought eccentric, to be a young old man lost in the florid declamations of the Renaissance or the lilied waters of Victorianism. To make puns in Latin at the faculty table. Never to shoot your vein full of heroin and go dig the fish.

Harry stared thoughtfully at Dr. Kasper. "If I could grow a hump," he said slowly, "I could be Alexander Pope."

Kasper glared. The Johnsonian rage swelled within him. But unexpectedly the bubble burst before he could bring it to fruition with the proper quote. Lapsing utterly out of character, he asked in a quiet voice, "What's the matter, Harry?"

Stunned at being spoken to by a living human being, Harry choked up. "I don't know."

"You think I'm a ridiculous old man?"

How could he deny it? "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

"Of course you did. But perhaps I pressed you into it."

Harry felt himself shrinking. "It's just that . . . Christ, how can I say it? I love our language and the things that can be done with it. I want to pass this on to kids who are just learning what it means to read things for themselves. If I spend the next six years at some sterile exercise in scholarship, it will kill the only thing in me that might make me a good teacher."

Kasper looked earnestly at him for a moment. Then his eyes slowly glazed over. "Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless," he intoned.

No use talking. Good as the language was, it couldn't follow Kasper's clean escape back into another century.

7

Harry was broke. He had to dodge Rachel after Grumbacher's lecture because he didn't have the money to sit in the cafeteria drinking coffee until Visual Aids class. He knew how willingly Rachel would buy the coffee, but he also knew he'd end up peddling whore's underwear.

Nick Philbert caught him at the corner of the hallway leading to the library, and they stopped to talk, leaning against the row of scarred green lockers. Nick looked very dapper in a new pair of beltless slacks and a cashmere sweater. His boyish face showed none of the ravages painted on the B-movie dope addict.

"I got a steady gig, man. With this little trio at the Crystal Room. You oughta fall in some night."

"I'd like to, Nick. I'm a little short right now."

"You want some bread? I'll loan you."

"No thanks. I've got a check coming for reading Kasper's class, if the goddam school ever gets it mailed to me. In the meantime I can hock my suit. But thanks for the offer."

"Forget it. You want to go out to the beach and fix up?"

Harry hesitated. It was an attractive alternative to Visual Aids.

"C'mon, man," Nick pressed. "It's a great kick. We fix up out by this big pile of driftwood, then walk up to Playland and make the scene on the Octopus. You'll wig!"

"I might at that. But I can't afford a habit."

"Who said habit? One little fix? You talk like J. Edgar."

"I'll level with you—I've had my one little fix. Back in my pre-beat super-cool hyper-hip days."

Nick's eyes widened. "Yeah? Didn't you dig it?"

"All too well." Harry paused, remembering. "Once, it's an experiment. Twice, it's a habit. You better watch it, Nick. You're getting quite a yen."

Nick shrugged nervously. "It's nothing. I could kick it easy, any time." An awkward pause. "Well, later, man."

The Visual Aids class was devoted to an hour-long demonstration on how to make bar graphs out of colored paper to indicate each student's progress. During what was called lab session Harry sat across a small table from Deke Prentiss, an ex-paratrooper with a hard, acne-pitted face, a record of five years as an insurance adjuster, and a burning desire to teach arithmetic to elementary children. They worked with scissors and stacks of multicolored paper, by common consent cutting out large block letters which, when neatly assembled, spelled SHIT. They left the message for Dr. Dobson as the bell rang for lunch.

Harry's apartment was a railroad flat—three rooms in a straight line—at the edge of the colored district. Rents were cheap here in this no-man's land where determined landlords were making an effort to hold the Mason-Dixon line. Harry sometimes wished he had the money to move across the border into a good building with a bunch of swinging blacks instead of staying here with the other po' white trash.

This afternoon the apartment looked squalid and depressing. By candlelight, with some Bach going on the lo-fi the place had a sort of standard bohemian charm, but in the glare of the afternoon sun it looked moldy. The sagging studio couch didn't quite cover that bald spot in the old maroon rug. It was a hell of a dump for a Phi Beta Kappa, magna cum laude, certified bright guy of twenty-eight. Harry poured the last glass of wine out of the cheap half-gallon jug, dumped his books on the sham-Victorian table, then slumped down to stare at the criss-cross of electric lines over the backyard and consider his obvious lack of . . . what? Something. It was hard to imagine what Jan saw in him.

She had spent the weekend with him, as usual, but he'd been so

broke they couldn't even go to a movie, and he wouldn't accept her offer to pay their way. So they had just played a few records, walked in the park—and of course made love. That was the good part. That couldn't have been better if he had a million dollars in small change and the big stuff in the bank. But there was always afterwards. He glanced over at the couch and got an unbidden image of Jan with her slim naked legs up—

Cut that out. That won't help.

He thought briefly of calling her, but she'd be busily translating some mysterious jargon from German into English, her very usefulness accenting his own stagnancy. On days like this he accused himself of going back to college only for the satisfaction of proving what an apt student he was.

He swallowed a big gulp of wine, trying to fill the hollow that had been growing in him for the past couple of years. He felt it most intensely in the presence of old school buddies now safely settled into well-paying jobs with rich futures. Why was he such a misfit? He'd had jobs, a dozen or so since graduation, but they all seemed so damn *useless*. Weird, what they pay money for these days. But it didn't seem to bother anyone else to pass a lifetime stamping out plastic souvenirs of Hawaii made in Los Angeles. Demand meaning, you get poverty.

The telephone caught him unaware, it so seldom rang. It was Wade Linden, of all people, a classmate of Harry's from undergraduate days, and now apparently the young man most likely to succeed. The very kind he'd learned to avoid, for his hollow's sake.

"—so if you could meet me after work, I can fill you in, give you the whole scoop," Wade was saying. Harry hmmmm'd, stalling, and Wade's voice broke through briskly. "It may not be permanent, but it should be fun, and it might lead to something else later. You should get three-fifty, maybe even four. Interested?"

Four. He must mean hundreds. Wow. "Where shall I meet you?"

Why me? Harry kept wondering as he walked toward the bar named by Linden. The streets were crowded with people just off work, and in this district they were mostly young, well-dressed types. He was glad he hadn't yet pawned the suit, but he wished it were a couple of years newer, with narrower lapels.

Why me? After all, he and Linden were so unlike. Linden was a

guided missile. His college courses had led directly to the kind of advertising job he now held, and a series of campus beauties had led to the chic, sophisticated young wife who had chilled Harry at their only meeting. That had been some three years ago, before college friendships began to wear thin and dissolve. The last he had heard from Linden was a letter a year ago, during the misguided tour of Europe, the expatriation try that fizzled. What an education toward Life Adjustment that had been. But apparently from the outside it looked like great fun and romantic as hell, for Linden's letter had been very cordial and full of admiration for Harry's travels, very deprecatory concerning his own recent appointment as assistant ad manager of a large downtown department store at the undreamed-of salary of a thousand dollars a month. The sum was so staggering to Harry he unconsciously eliminated Linden from his list of friends. He had Moved Up, which removed him from daily reality as thoroughly as if he had died.

What he had forgotten about Linden was that he was likable. Cool and self-assured all right, but not at all the bloodless and efficient young executive on the make. Far from looking aloof and superior at Harry's aging suit, Linden seemed really glad to see Harry, and by the end of the first drink they were buddies again.

"Why me, Wade?" Harry found it surprisingly easy to ask.

"I can't think of anybody else," said Wade with a disarming grin. "It's my job to dig up somebody suitable, and I know you could do the work. I don't know anybody else who could, or would, at the price."

"There must be hundreds of bright young ad men prowling the streets for jobs."

"Sure. But you can't tell anything in a couple of job interviews. Some guys come on very strong, but they can't even write a headline. I know you can write, anyhow, from that stuff you published in college."

"That's not much to go on."

"Don't be modest. I think you can do the job. If I'm wrong, I'll take the blame. Do you want to hear about it?"

"Sure, but—" Harry thought of saying he was busy getting a teaching credential, but didn't. "Sure, go ahead."

As Wade outlined the situation, it looked simple. The downtown

department stores had for several years been losing business to the suburban shopping centers. Denbury's, the store Linden worked for, was being reorganized for an all-out effort to reverse the tide and bring people back downtown. Denbury's would be re-christened Stylewise Inc. with an intensive promotion spread over the next few months. They were going all-out with newspaper supplements, TV spots, sound trucks, a hole-in-one golf tournament, and to cap it off a carnival conducted inside the store, with live entertainers, free prizes, celebrity appearances, and Christ knows what all, for it hadn't been thought of yet. The point was to drag everyone in town through the store on some pretext or other. As Wade pointed out, it would take a lot of work, but it might also be some fun. The main burden of organizing the blowout had fallen on him, but he could hire an assistant, and he hoped it would be Harry. A lot of the time Harry would be on his own, seeing people about newspaper space, golf tournament trophies, free prizes for drawings, free booze for visiting celebrities, and so on. When the week-long carnival was over, so was Harry's job, but with all the staff shakeup going on there just might be an opening.

Harry shrugged off the question of permanence in the job. Seemed like every time he got really short and had to take some bum gig as a stop-gap he had to go through a sad and futile routine about the great retirement benefits at sixty-five. Temporary was fine. But he was all tied up with this credential jazz.

"Do you do the actual hiring?" he surprised himself by asking.

"You'll have to talk with Gunnison. He's the general advertising manager. But I've told him about you, and he'll take my recommendation, unless you bite him on the leg or something."

They had another martini while Linden kept filling in details. It would not really be a desk job, it would be mostly leg-work and so-called public relations. So long as the work got done, nobody would care where Harry was at any given moment. He just might, it occurred to him, even be attending a class now and then. Those Education courses only took about one-tenth of his mind. He could cut most of them and still make out okay if warned when the tests were coming. Three months at four hundred—twelve hundred dollars. A fortune to a guy confronted with hocking his only suit. But if he

blew the credential by flunking out and then the job fizzled after a few months, he'd be left nowhere. *No* where.

He would never have cast himself as a brash young publicity man. It would be awkward to fail, with Linden depending on him. And what about Kasper and his test papers? He couldn't drop that chore. It was just too much. Teaching was his way out of the whole aimless, agonizing drift since college, 'trying to find himself' as friends kindly put it. Screwing off was more like it. He must not lose sight of his goal. Too bad, but he'd have to pass the job.

"Say, do you still go around with that same girl? What was her name . . . Jan? She was a terrific little girl, as I recall."

"Yeah, I still see her occasionally," said Harry. It would sure be nice to take her out to dinner after we make it. She deserves it. "I guess you better make me an appointment with Gunnison."

"You'll take it? Great!" said Linden with real joy. He lifted his hand for the waitress. "Let's have a drink on it. Hey, listen, what the hell was Europe really like? I'd have given anything to go over with you and just bum around like that."

The two martinis had made Harry almost high enough to find the truth attractive. But in deference to Linden's illusions about the Grand Tour he selected instead an anecdote polished by repeated use, a story about a Montmartre costume ball. The characters had become as stylized as Hemingway expatriates, so that Harry could not recall the actual people involved. But it was easier to push aside the great undigested weight of Europe in his head and just tell funny little stories. That was what people wanted to hear.

Linden was laughing heartily at the part about the nude beauty contest, and it occurred to Harry he might make a passable public relations man at that, deception being the stock in trade.

8

By the end of his first day on the job Harry had a friend and an enemy. The friend was Morton Radford, senior fashion artist of the department, a man who had survived four advertising managers and twenty years of alcoholism. He was now enjoying—or enduring—a dry cycle of five years duration, a new record in his colorful history.

"In the good old days before the bridges," he told Harry over morning coffee, "you could get on the ferry in the morning with everything quiet and peaceful and be drunk by the time you got to the city. Try that driving through the goddam bridge traffic." He smiled reminiscently. "One night I ran like hell to make the last boat home, leaped across five feet of water, fell on my ass on the deck, busted my pint and cut my hip, but everybody cheered, by God." A sad little chuckle. "Then the boat pulled in and everybody got off."

Harry was given space at a battered desk in a cubicle with a young copywriter named Grady Woods, who casually sat on Harry's desk while introducing himself, as a way of establishing rank, but Harry was too dense to understand. Half an hour later he unthinkingly sat on Grady's desk to ask him some questions, and Grady startled him by saying, with remarkable ferocity, "Get your ignorant posterior off *my* hardwood." To a young man on the way up, his desk is a vital extension of his personality, and can be sat upon only by superiors exercising their authority. Confronted with Grady's righteous wrath, Harry gently but audibly farted. Later Grady dili-

gently polished the desk top with a can of pressurized wax until it gleamed, but the dishonor was indelible in his mind, and he had every intention of exacting revenge.

Before the affair of the desk Grady had warned Harry about Morton. "Watch out for the old coot down in the end cubicle. He's been here forever—used to be a terrible lush. They'd search his desk and frisk him at the door—watch him like a hawk all day. But still by noon he'd be stoned. Turned out he kept gin in one of those ink bottles along the back of the desk and a special brush. Whenever he got thirsty he'd dip the brush in the gin, then—you know how they do to get a fine line—put it to his mouth and suck it dry. They finally caught on when they noticed he was refilling that one ink bottle about five times a day from a gallon can on the shelf. Better stay away from him."

So Morton and Harry quickly became friends. They lunched together whenever Harry's chores kept him downtown through the noon hour, for Morton enjoyed seeing Harry have a couple of martinis and loosen up. It gave him what he called a contact high, the only kind he was allowed now. Harry never tired of listening to his stories, always told artlessly and without beginning, materializing out of an ordinary conversation: "—he was this friend I mentioned, this dentist, the one I used to get drunk with all the time. I remember one morning instead of getting on the ferry I went to his office with him to see about a bad tooth. It was early, and since I had a toothache, he said he'd squeeze me in ahead of his first patient. So he fixed up the tooth then broke out a fifth he had in with the novacaine and we drank it. I left for work and I didn't see him again for quite a while, then I heard he got run out of town. When I finally ran into him, he was practicing here in the city, and I asked him what the hell had happened over in the country. Turned out his first patient that morning had been a widow he'd been banging now and then, and he got out another bottle to share with her. Pretty soon he was too drunk to fix her teeth, so not to waste the appointment they put the chair out flat and had a go. They sort of passed out afterward, and when he woke up all he could see was lots of little kids standing around staring at them. Then he remembered that was the morning the first grade teacher was bringing the class in for a demonstration on dental hygiene."

Harry considered it a rare opportunity, having the chance to talk with a qualified expert on the subject of drinking. With the possible exception of sex, no subject is more beclouded by asinine pronouncements from psychiatrists, sociologists, and clergy.

"Why did you drink, Mort? Big Problems?"

"Naw, hell, I drank because it was *fun*. More things seemed to happen when I was drunk. Life wasn't so boring."

"Then why did you quit?"

"I got old and careless. Started having accidents."

"What accident made you go on the wagon?"

"I guess the clincher was the night I was going down to Palo Alto with Fred Jorgenson—he used to work here. He'd asked me to spend the weekend down at his place, so we had a few belts after work Friday night, then we drank a pint on the commute train, and damned if we didn't ride past Palo Alto almost to San Jose. So we had a few drinks in whatever town we were in, then tried to catch the train back to Palo Alto. By this time it was midnight or so, and the depot was locked up—not a soul around. So we waited a while, and finally a train came through, but we'd forgot to put the signal up, so it never even slowed down. After midnight that was only a flag stop. Anyhow, we figured it out and put the signal up for the next train, an hour from then, the last one of the night. Well, we sang a few songs, and the time went by quick enough, for here came the train with me taking a last-minute piss in the shrubbery beside the station. Fred ran out to the head of the platform, waving his arms to make sure the engineer got the signal, and I gave it a fast shake and ran like hell to grab onto the bar car as it went by. Whammo! I didn't know what the hell hit me! All of a sudden everything was dark, with a big roaring in my ears and shapes flashing past in the blackness, and all I could do was hang on for dear life. I finally let go about two miles up the track, and I went ass over teakettle along the ties for a hundred yards. The cops finally found me 'cause Fred had gone to the station and told them I'd been killed. Scared him to death, poor bastard, the way I just vanished. I'd grabbed the Limited from L.A. to San Francisco."

Harry felt for Morton the respect due a master in any field. "How do you feel about being a drunk? I mean as a career."

"I'm just sorry I couldn't bring it off successfully," said Morton. "I

keep thinking I might have another try at it, but I know I'd screw up. End up as a skid row bum." He lit a cigarette. "That's my out. Any time things get too bad, I've always got that alternative. You're one up on life when you know the worst that can happen to you."

9

Byron Marcus lived in a big concrete hive of the kind municipalities put up to shelter the underprivileged and the professional indigent. When brand new, before the cement bleeds through the bright pastel paint, such projects look like an improvement over the slums they replace. After a few years their sole virtue shows through; they are durable.

Harry climbed the three flights of open stairs smelling faintly of pee, walked down the open deck which served as a hallway, and knocked at Byron's door. Byron was a friend from beat days, and Harry had not broken the habit of dropping in on him. Seeing Byron was a reminder not to go backward. There was a light inside, and a jazz record going, loud.

"Yeah, like, who?" Byron's deep voice.

"Harry, the Bastard King of England."

Byron threw open the door and went to change the record, leaving Harry to wade through to a chair. The Marcus apartment always looked as though a huge mortar had been loaded with canned goods, furniture, clothing, and human artifacts, then fired through the window. There was no effort to organize the shrapnel; they lived in it as it fell. Byron dumped a pile of papers from a chair onto the floor, cleared some old cans and plastic cartons off the table with a sweep of his arm, and gestured for Harry to sit. "So what's happening, man?"

"Not much," said Harry. "Where's Lisa?"

"Posing. Night class at the art center." Byron lit a wooden match and huffed at his pipe. "Bunch of old squares—fallout from the cultural explosion. Getting their peekaboo goodies."

Lisa was no great beauty, but her figure was ripe and her face was that dinner-plate Mona Lisa shape admired by painters. Like Byron, she was dedicated to the propositon that two could live as cheaply as none. She enjoyed modeling because she could easily leave her body still and her mind blank, and for resting thus in public view she got two dollars an hour. Occasionally Byron took a modeling job, but he preferred costume work to the balls-and-all life classes. Modeling was a status gig with the beats, for it meant getting paid for *doing nothing*. No matter if the forced immobility made your muscles scream, and you ended the day exhausted—the fact remained, you were not working, therefore not aiding this rotten society. And there was a subliminal element of protest in dangling your privates out there.

"How are things at school?" asked Byron.

Harry held his nose briefly. "You know the latest? Sociodrama. Getting the juveniles to make up a little playlet in which they act out their repressions and hostilities. Unknown to them, of course. But teacher sees all."

"Nutty. You teaching psych or drama?"

"English, believe it or not. You inject it painlessly during the dialogue. A neurosis healed is a syntax learned."

Byron shook his head judicially and sucked at his pipe. Dishes began to break in the next apartment, smashing regularly against the concrete wall. Four, a pause, then four more.

"Jake Summers moved in there," said Byron. "That's his wife."

The door to the deck opened and Jake came in, grinning with delight at the sight of Harry. They exchanged the greetings of old friends parted by the wars of life. Jake was a painter, so good he had been refused a scholarship to the Art Center on the grounds that he would lead all the students out of the ruts trod by the faculty. One of the teachers, a turncoat, had reported the results of the scholarship hearing to Jake, and had tried to make it up to him personally. People regularly set out to salvage Jake's great and untamed spirit for the good of humanity, and Jake always tried to cooperate. The art teacher gave Jake a room in his home and set out to find him

a respectable job to sustain him while he painted masterpieces. By the time he got home, Jake had the masterpieces painted already, all over the walls. Somewhere during the day he had acquired a number six bag of mescal buttons, on which he made his lunch. Then, untroubled by the lack of communication which grips most mystics, he had painted what he saw. The art teacher's wife, firmly mired in humdrum reality, preferred her original color scheme. She threw Jake and the teacher out.

Returning the favor, Jake found them an abode in a condemned building inhabited by an assortment of derelicts, petty criminals, junkies, and a booking agent for lascivious exhibitions. In two weeks the art teacher sank gibbering into limbo. Jake took him home to his wife, apologized her into bed, screwed her four times, then drifted back into his own erratic orbit.

The new wife smashing dishes next door was a rising young vocalist who had become enamored of Jake, hearing in his piano playing the magic which would lift them both to fame. Besides, he was such a wonderful guy if someone would just take him in hand and channel his creativity. She was sure she could do the job.

Smash! went another dish against the concrete. A large one this time, probably a platter. Jake grinned apologetically and offered a half-empty fifth he was clutching. Byron rinsed out two cheese glasses at the sink and Jake poured them full. They drank as they talked.

"Haven't seen you lately, Harry. Where you been?"

"Getting a teaching credential."

"Weird kick, man."

"Yeah. What's new with you?"

"Nothing. Same old shuck."

"Tell him about making the scene at the asylum," said Byron.

"Oh, yeah, that," said Jake, offhand. "I turned myself in. Some cat gave me a box of pills and said to take just two. I was drunk, you know, so I kept forgetting how many I took, and pretty soon they were all gone. I don't know what they were—I think something they make out of those mushrooms, you know? Anyhow, I tried for about a week to come down, but I couldn't find the ground. I couldn't even paint, the colors were so bright they hurt my eyes. Then somebody brought over a gallon of wine, and I figured a big hangover

was what I needed to shoot me down. But when I woke up I was in Napa. In Ward A, man. That's for the boss nuts, the real experts. Cats spend years working up to Ward A. It was quite an honor. But at first I didn't dig, see? I thought I was at some kind of big party—all these odd cats walking around, being friendly. But they didn't make sense! I talked to them for about two hours, trying to get straight, but it was scary. I thought I'd gone crazy!"

Harry took a long drink. "I can see how you might."

"But as soon as they told me I was in the nut house, I knew I was all right. What a relief!"

Bong! went something metal against the wall. "I guess she ran out of dishes," said Jake. "I'm getting sorta worried about her lately. She acts kinda hostile."

"Why don't you get some plastic dishes?" asked Byron. "I saw a whole set down at the Goodwill yesterday. Hardly used."

Jake shook his head. "It's no good when you throw a plate and it just bounces. You don't get any release that way." He turned to Harry. "Hey, you wanta make some money—peddling dirty pictures? It's a natural if you're going to college. I know a guy who'll furnish the pictures and split fifty-fifty. People, animals, daisy chain—"

"No thanks," said Harry. "Besides my classes I've got one moonlighting gig already. All I can handle."

"I didn't want to do it either," said Jake. "They're not very good pictures. Even the dogs look sad."

Harry drained his cheese glass and stood up. "Nice seeing you again, Jake. Keep swinging. Later, Byron. Say hello to Lisa."

"Hey, look in my window and see if the storm is over, will you?" said Jake. "My old lady'll be taking off her clothes. She likes to get laid after a big temper tantrum. It calms her down."

"I'll honk the horn twice if it's okay," said Harry, closing the door gently after him, gratefully returning to his own world.

As he passed Jake's window he glanced inside—not liking the peeping tom aspect, but curious nevertheless. At first he saw no one; the room was quiet. Then in the half darkness of the adjoining room he saw her. Myra was her name, he recalled suddenly. She had her head down across her folded arms, flat on the table, the curve of her back an eloquent sculpturing of despair. Harry was more transfixed

by the sight than if he had, as half expected, seen her naked and lustful.

In one of her hands was a piece of paper, half crumpled. A letter from home? An unpaid bill? It didn't matter. The paper was part of her utter defeat. Her hair, long and auburn, fell in tangles over her forearms. Her cheap blouse had a ripped seam below the armpit. So short a time ago she had stood, neat and happy in a new spring suit, exchanging with Jake the vows expected to last forever. All he really needed was someone to love him and channel his wonderful vitality.

Poor girl, born too soon, deprived of a chance to learn life adjustment through group dynamics. To her, English had meant the dull difference between shall and will, would and should. If only her teacher had known how to teach English disguised as little dramas in interpersonal relationships, then surely Myra would have learned how to cope with drunkenness, drugs, infidelity, poverty, hysteria, and broken crockery. With a sense of great weariness Harry went down the steps and got into his car. He was careful not to touch the horn.

10

A page from Harry's class notebook, formerly from Educ. 216B.

Assignment: work out Unit of Pub. Spk. for soph class hi school built around readings from Silas Marner. (*joys of miserliness?*)

Test in Grumbacher's class next Wed. Borrow Rachel's notes.
Assignment: plan Unit of senior hi English around current news issue. (*napalm versus nerve gas as way of spreading democracy*)

Make poster for Visual Aids on Clean Teeth. (*for or against?*)

buy case of booze to liquor up sports writers for golf tourney
see yellow pages re big tank for live trout fishing in sports dept during carnival. (*maybe plastic swimming pool outfit*)
check with Linden re schedule of celebrity appearances
write rough copy for daily store handouts listing sale items
conference thurs. with Gunnison and Linden re overall budget
phone talent schools for free models for sportswear during carnival week. bribe if necessary.
price sound system rentals. start planning sound tapes.
think of six special stunts, one a day, for free publicity
phone Jan re weekend

fast . . pray . meditate

II

Dr. Grumbacher and Dr. Fleschie both had large classes and consequently never missed individual faces at the lectures. Dr. Willhunt missed Harry but secretly rejoiced in his absences, sensing an increased opportunity to flunk this troublemaker. Dr. Dobson's heart was not really in Visual Aids (even he knew it was a waste of time), so he was never harsh with absentees. As a result, Harry was able to maneuver through the final month of the semester without much difficulty. By exploring alternate routes he was able to cut his commute time from the ad offices to the campus to a neat fourteen minutes, parking his old Ford in the reserved faculty lot at school and in the loading alley behind the store downtown.

Final exams posed a problem, coming as they did during the week of the big Hole-in-One Promotion. By adroit juggling Harry was on time for the tests given by Fleschie and Willhunt. He was ten minutes late for Grumbacher's, but finished in half the allotted time anyhow. Visual Aids was the bad problem, for it came on the opening day of the Golf Tournament, when Gunnison and all the sports writers were to be present, watching the local pros from every golf club in the city have a go at the grand prize. The golf tourney had served its primary purpose before it began, getting each and every contestant into the store to register. But Gunnison saw the tournament as an opportunity for lots of free space in the sports pages, and Harry's job was to see that they got every possible inch. Sports writers, being human, love good bourbon and hate work, so Harry's task

was to keep them liquored up whenever possible, provide them with daily results when greater responsibilities kept them away from the course, and—last but far from least—invent heartwarming little human-interest stories involving contestants in the tourney and the *name of the sponsoring store.* In a burst of sheer imagination Gunnison had christened the tournament "The Stylewise Inc. All-City Hole-in-One Contest." This imposing name appeared faithfully in each and every press release invented by Harry and was faithfully dropped by the editors whenever the material was printed. Editors hate advertisers as naturally as mice hate cats, and nothing pleases them more than deleting a free plug.

The conflict of Visual Aids and the tournament opening was solved with the help of Nick Philbert. Nick had taken the course a couple of years ago, padding out his heavy diet of Spinoza and Schopenhauer with a few easy credits, and he volunteered to take the test for Harry. Dr. Dobson had already announced that it would be a printed true-false test, given in the big auditorium to combine the several Visual Aids classes at one time. There was little chance of Harry being missed, and little chance Nick would flunk it, so Harry gratefully agreed. Though he didn't mention it to Harry, Nick decided to take a big fix of H just before the test so as to enjoy this unique opportunity to the fullest. Aside from being unable to stifle a few giggles while reading the questions, Nick performed admirably. He finished half an hour ahead of time and was cool enough to just sit back and dig the scene, waiting for the last minute rush before handing in the papers bearing Harry's name. Imagine an entire roomful of grownup and presumably intelligent people spending a whole morning marking little X's in boxes beside sentences which read: "The purpose of visual and/or auditory supplements to the curriculum is to fully exploit the learning potentiality of the students." Like, funny.

While Nick was absorbed in this spectacle, Harry was setting out the bottles of hundred-proof bourbon, the Dixie cups, and the insulated bag of ice cubes in the room of the clubhouse reserved for reporters and tournament officials. On the table were three rented typewriters, should the representatives of the city's three dailies feel moved by the muse simultaneously. There was the continual possibility that someone out on the tee might actually score a hole-in-one,

and during this dry sports season between football and baseball, this might constitute front page news.

Harry popped the cork and poured himself three glugs into a Dixie cup so the first thirsty reporter wouldn't feel put off by a virgin bottle. Linden walked up, and Harry fixed him a drink.

"Trophies all ready?" asked Linden.

"All engraved and in the greenskeeper's shack."

"He's a crusty old bird. How'd you manage his help?"

"I stored the booze with the trophies. Told him to feel free."

"Did you remember to hire a photographer?"

"He phoned a little while ago. Should be here any minute."

"I knew I was right about hiring you," said Linden. "You've done a smooth job. If the Carnival comes off this well, we'll have a hard time firing you."

When pros from all the local clubs had fired three balls each with no near misses, the first tee was honored with the presence of Sherwood L. Murvyn III, formerly President and General Manager of Denbury's, now Board Chairman of Stylewise Inc. Murvyn was the Big Boss, an owlish little man who had had the foresight to choose a rich and predatory grandfather. The original Sherwood L. Murvyn had joined Denbury as a junior partner and had driven him early to the grave, childless. Thus a respectful silence seized the group as the latest Sherwood L. Murvyn hooked a three wood into the trees beyond the specially placed first hole. This event was followed by the teeing-off of Advertising Manager E. B. Gunnison, who sent a powerful slice whistling off into the ninth fairway. Murvyn and Gunnison then boarded an electric caddy cart to proceed on the full round of eighteen holes and to be near at hand for publicity pictures later with the day's lucky winner of a fifty-dollar merchandise order at Stylewise Inc.

Linden returned to the office, and Harry went back into the press room of the clubhouse. Around the first tee the unknown duffers were lining up for their chance at fame and free clothing. The three typewriters were silent, but the bourbon bottle was getting a stiff workout. The reporters knew this promotion for its true value, a space filler on dull days and a chance at some genuine bottled-in-bond too rich for a reporter's salary.

"Thought I'd shit when old Murvyn hooked his tee shot into the

woods," chuckled Sam Wall. He stirred his ice with his finger.

"Gunnison didn't dare hit a decent drive after that," said Ed Fox. "Funny, when he plays the boss, his game goes all to pieces."

P. D. Quentin, the third reporter, did not join in the pleasantries. He was the city's reigning fish-and-game columnist, a crotchety old woodsman who considered golf "a turd's game." He resented having to cover this assignment for the regular golf writer, who was in Vegas or Phoenix or some damn place, supposedly covering a big tournament but more likely screwing himself to death and cribbing the stories from the news wire.

In a few minutes Wall and Quentin departed for their cars, assured by Harry that he would phone their offices if anything newsworthy developed and furnish the name of the day's close-ball winner. In their cars they found the expected untapped bottles, bearing neat little cards expressing the admiration of Stylewise Inc. for the power of the press in general and the writer in particular. Harry had quickly learned that one never *hands* a gift to a reporter. This smacks of attempting to corrupt a free and enlightened press; it implies a favor expected for one granted. Reporters simply *find* little tokens of esteem for their ability, and if this causes them to think kindly of the donor, then how can there be any blame?

Ed Fox had a later press time and nothing special happening, so he sat around the clubhouse shooting the breeze with Harry. Like so many young men after college graduation, Harry had thought the life of a reporter would offer him the kind of excitement he craved plus the chance to achieve a position of respect from which he could issue the necessary edicts to improve the world. He had applied at all the city dailies and been told there was a six-month waiting list to join the staff as copyboy at a starvation wage. So now he found it interesting to learn firsthand of the life denied him.

"Sports writing is the best job on the paper," said Ed, growing expansive after the third belt. "After all, what does it matter? I mean, whether Palmer or Nicklaus wins the Masters? Whether Cal or Stanford wins the Big Game? It's all a crock, you know. So it's a good job, nobody minds writing it." He polished off the Dixie cup and Harry handed him a fresh one with the bottle. "Sure a relief after the regular run of crap. Boy, the lousy stories I've had to chase down in my time." He waved the cup and sloshed a bit of bourbon

over his hand. He licked his knuckles thoughtfully, then continued. "Like, the minute the police beat phones in a rape, you gotta hustle out to the girl's house with a photographer. You get to the home about the same time as the guys from the other papers. The old lady comes to the door and you hit her with the news as crude as possible so the cameraman gets a good reaction shot of the grief-stricken mother. Then somebody keeps the old lady busy while you sneak in and steal the dame's picture off the dresser. And you damn well *better* steal it, before the guy from the other paper does. There oughta be a Pulitzer prize for the best thief in the reporting business."

"Don't you ever get sued?" asked Harry.

"How? Who's gonna prove anything? We can always say they gave us the picture and changed their minds later. The cops are on our side. They don't want a bad press. They got too many skeletons in the closet to get the papers on their necks." He took another quick swallow. "Naw, I'll take the sports beat. A good clean fixed fight is a cinch to write."

At eleven forty-six that morning, as Sherwood L. Murvyn and E. B. Gunnison were holing out on the twelfth, an unsung hero named Benjamin Combs hit a two iron off the first tee. It bounced once at the edge of the green, hit the rim of the cup on the fly, and lodged there between the cup wall and the flag, which trembled with the shock.

Also trembling with the shock, some moments later, was Sherwood L. Murvyn. It meant that the store was out a thousand-dollar merchandise order (say a net loss of six hundred dollars), but it was well worth it. This was good publicity, *great* publicity, the very thing the promotion needed on opening day. They might be able to extend the contest and open up registration to drag another five thousand people through the store.

Harry phoned the momentous news to Quentin and Wall, and Ed Fox scored a clean beat with an on-the-spot interview of the smiling winner. Harry's hired photographer took pictures from a dozen angles, sometimes managing to include Combs' happy face along with the gleaming trophy featuring the name of Stylewise Inc. It was E. B. Gunnison who thought of the great human touch of having Sherwood L. Murvyn himself cordially shaking hands and present-

ing the merchandise order to Combs. Murvyn was still congratulating Gunnison on this idea when the crowd parted and they got their first look at Benjamin Combs.

"Jesus Christ, the guy's a spade!" said Murvyn's shocked whisper.

"Better smile, chief," mumbled Gunnison, already hating himself for his bright idea. Later he would have to explain, he knew, that after all their money was as good as anybody else's, and Stylewise was out for a twenty percent volume increase this year. And he knew already that Murvyn's bitter answer would be that he had nothing against smokes, but goddammit, let's be realistic, how much buying power do they have, compared to all the Okies, Arkies, and white southerners the city had filled up with. It was bound to look like they were running a jig store, and people would stay away by the thousands.

But already the crowd, the photographer, and reporter Fox had closed in on them. Murvyn managed to pull his lips back in a thin grimace that showed the edges of his gold-filled teeth, but he never came close to matching the joyous, radiant smile of Benjamin Combs.

Harry watched the happy gathering from a window of the press room, a full Dixie cup of bourbon in his hand. It had been a perfect opening day.

Harry got A's from Grumbacher (Prin. Sec. Educ.) and Fleschie (Teach. Pub. Spk. and Dram.) but dropped to a B in Dobson's Visual Aids. Nick had come through beautifully in the final, but Dr. Dobson considered Harry's collection of posters a bit—well, unusual. For instance, the one about clean teeth was a bit strong. (Harry had borrowed via Rachel from Roscoe's collection of broken bridgework, and had mounted it over a stark warning: BRUSH—OR ELSE!) In the crucial Educ. 216B from Dr. Willhunt, Harry received a C, as expected. Willhunt had genuinely hated not being able to flunk Harry cold, but in view of his brilliant test paper and the utterly convincing Project Folder on Unit Planning, Dr. Willhunt simply could not bring himself to put down an F on the grade sheet. As he expressed it to himself, he really did have a sense of justice. And in case of complaint to the Dean, he knew he could just-

ify the C on the basis of class absences. After all, he still had next semester to get even. He sat running his comb through his wavy blond hair and considered the matter of Harry's practice-teaching assignment.

12

"Dr. Kasper has spoken to me about the advisability of your obtaining a junior college credential instead of a general secondary," Dr. Willhunt paused and gave Harry what he thought of as his "quizzical" smile. "He seems to think rather highly of you, for some reason."

"It is hard to understand, isn't it?" said Harry pleasantly.

Dr. Willhunt turned off the smile. "As you know, curriculum requirements for both credentials are the same. Assuming you can pass the oral examination for the Master's degree at the end of the semester, you will be eligible for the junior college credential if your practice-teaching work is at the proper academic level."

"So I understand."

"As your Education Department advisor, I rather concur in Dr. Kasper's recommendation. It seems to me you might lack the—shall we say, sympathetic understanding necessary for general secondary students. So your practice-teaching will be done—"

Willhunt paused and searched his desk, riffling through papers as though to refresh his memory, making Harry sweat it out. "I did have a couple of interesting classes lined up for you at Boys Polytechnic, but I suppose someone else will get that plum."

"Yeah," said Harry. "Too bad I'll miss old Switchblade Tech."

Willhunt frowned and picked up a paper. "Your classes will be in English A, right here in the college. How convenient."

"English A?"

"Yes. Monday, Wednesday, Friday at eight A.M. and Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday at eight A.M." Willhunt had to let himself smile.

Harry managed to keep his voice quiet and level. "Dr. Kasper suggested I might be able to teach one section of the lower division writing course, in view of my experience."

"Dr. Kasper is not your Education advisor," said Dr. Willhunt firmly. "Having published a few pieces of fiction in what can only be described as 'popular' publications hardly qualifies you to teach writing at a college level."

"But both classes of dumbbell English—!" a heartfelt cry.

Dr. Willhunt arched his tailored brows to their maximum capability. "We do *not* refer to English A by that term."

"A rose by any other name . . ."

"You will be graded on your practice-teaching classes," said Willhunt with satisfaction, "and a portion of your grade will be determined by your attitude. I suggest that your attitude is not at all satisfactory at this point."

Harry kept silence and breathed deeply.

"Due to the, uh, *corrective* nature of English A, you will not be asked to organize your material on the Unit Plan," said Willhunt. "Since you have expressed your aversion to this enlightened method, I trust you will be pleased. What you *will* be asked to do is stress the fundamental rules of grammar and syntax. Students in English A classes are there because they simply cannot read and write at the level of competence necessary to survive other courses of study at college level. You will be expected to remedy this situation."

"I teach the subject, not the children," said Harry.

Willhunt closed his eyes, his patience making Job seem a hothead. "If you will sign these forms, that will conclude our interview."

Harry moved around the desk, taking out his only sentimental possession, the lifetime gold pen given him by Jan. As he bent to sign the forms his eye was caught by a minor disaster. Behind the row of Willhunt's books an ink bottle lay capsized, top open, a shiny black pool spreading from it.

Dr. Willhunt caught Harry's startled expression and gave a genial chuckle. He reached out, picked up the bottle. The ink stain came up with it, intact. Another miracle of modern science.

"Quite realistic, don't you think?" said Willhunt. "One of my bet-

ter students gave it to me. A little token of appreciation. I've had no end of fun with it."

Harry signed the forms. "It's pretty good, but as a sight gag I like those plastic dog turds better. They arouse a different emotion than spilled ink."

Harry's two classes of English A were neatly divided. The Mon-Wed-Fri group was composed of foreign students, many of them on exchange programs that had helped the college overlook basic shortcomings. The Tue-Thur-Sat group was made up of home grown dullards and misfits. Each group posed its peculiar challenge.

Unlike the lovable immigrants of song and story, Harry's students were not given to saying explosively funny things in their quaint dialects, nor were they shining examples of universal brotherhood.

"Mr. Hadji, would you please conjugate the verb 'to be' for us?"

Mr. Hadji gave Harry a malevolent look from his olive eyes. *Why pick on me?* It made Harry feel sympathetic toward the Jews. Think of a whole country of Mr. Hadjis sitting on your border.

"I be. You be. He be." said Mr. Hadji in a flat, hostile tone.

Harry looked around the class hopefully. He saw the tops of fourteen heads. No one would risk meeting his eye, lest the dread task of recitation fall upon them. Hadji alone glared at him, having suffered the worst already.

Harry took refuge in his love of the language. He turned to the blackboard and began to write. " 'To be' is what we call an irregular verb," he said. "Most verbs in English have been regularized, that is, given a common form for the first, second, and third person. But 'to be' is used so frequently in everyday speech that it has retained individual forms, such as 'I am,' 'he is,' and 'you are.' " He went on patiently explaining, the visiting orator at the deaf-and-dumb asylum. "This same irregularity of common verbs occurs in several other languages, French for example. *'Je suis,' 'il est.'* Or in Spanish, *'Yo soy,' el está.'* " Harry caught hopeful gleams of comprehension from Mr. Boni and Miss Questa. Maybe he was on the right track. "Are there any irregular verbs in Arabic, Mr. Hadji?"

Hadji pulled his thoughts painfully back across the broad ocean. To suffer this inquisition twice in one morning was really too much. He would slay this dog of a Christian with one glance.

"What you mean?" he said in a low, barely audible growl.

"Never mind," said Harry. "We'll skip it. Let's compare an irregular verb with a regular one, such as 'to see.' Mr. Cartalo, will you please conjugate 'to see' for us?"

"I seen. You seen. He seen."

The home-grown dullards were quite different. They sensed a punitive motive behind their compulsory attendance at the illogical hour of eight A.M. and on Saturdays, too, when the rest of the world was at play. Like most prisoners, they were bitter and rebellious.

Except for Miss Janice Rohl. She was a sweetly attractive brunette, a freshman just turned nineteen, a graduate of one of the city's better high schools. She seemed moderately intelligent and confided in her opening essay, with a naïve idealism which pleased Harry, that she hoped someday to become a secretary in the United Nations or possibly the World Health Organization. She remained after class the first day to talk with Harry, shyly apologizing for her presence in what she forthrightly called 'dumbbell English,' but expressing the hope that Harry would help her learn perfect grammar very shortly. When she had departed, Harry briefly and silently gave thanks to God.

Two weeks later he began to understand the deeply poetic insight that the serpent is the subtlest of all the beasts of the field. For in Miss Janice Rohl he perceived all the temptations which lie in wait for teachers.

She was bright, and a teacher instinctively leans on the bright student for help and encouragement. When knowledge seems awash in a sea of idiots, the bright student revives the teacher's hopes by supplying a correct answer. See, all is not lost!

She wanted to learn. An oddly rare, almost unique trait, at least in Harry's hand-picked group.

She was attractive. Amid this early morning collection of pimples, pomade, and pincurls, her look of freshly washed cleanliness and smoothly brushed hair was like Murine in a sunburned eye.

She was friendly and cooperative. She spent extra time preparing the little essays Harry assigned, she frequently stayed after class to clear up difficult questions, and she seemed to regard Harry as a

strangely gifted person, not as a jailer with the elusive code words to freedom.

The cleverest touch by a wily Satan was in naming her Janice. The familiar word *Jan* sprang so readily to mind he had to constantly remind himself to call her "Miss Rohl." Memory being the lecher it is, he had to fight down erotic images of his own Jan while speaking with this one. And imagination being even less moral than memory, he soon had to contend with speculation as to how this Jan might compare with his own Jan in bed. On the basis of legs it looked about even, but Miss Rohl was perhaps more generously endowed in the breast department. As for appetite—but that way lay madness.

Thus at the very beginning of his teaching career, Harry was brought to realize two cardinal principles: (1) the wise teacher does not neglect the dull student for the bright one; (2) the wise teacher does not screw his students.

But would he be a wise teacher? One sunny Saturday morning when Harry was free of studies and, for a change, caught up on his promotional chores from the store, Jan—Miss Rohl, that is—came to his desk as the class was dismissed to thank him for the A on the essay assignment returned to the class that day. Mr. Pokrovsky, an overweight football lineman, paused at the door, leered knowingly at Harry, then left them alone.

"There's no need to thank me," said Harry. "Your essay was very well done. It showed coherent thought as well as good grammar. You've improved a lot in a short time."

She smiled, genuinely happy. She had lovely white teeth. "I was so worried. I mean, I'm going out to the beach today, and I was afraid the whole day would be ruined if I got a bad grade on this. I'd feel like I should stay home and study."

"You've earned the holiday. Have a good time."

"I will. I'm going to this special spot I know about, down the coast a few miles. The beach is always deserted." She paused, giving a shy, sidelong glance. "I spend the whole day watching the ocean and reading poetry." She opened a straw bag and showed Harry a pocket anthology of modern poets. "I really get a lot more out of the poems since I've been in your class."

"Thank you. That's very encouraging."

A pause. "Sometimes I get stuck, though, and I . . . I try to imagine how you'd explain the meaning. If you were with me."

Down, Satan!

"I don't quite understand how you came to be in this class," said Harry, heroically trying to turn the conversation. "You learn quickly. Did you miss a lot of English classes in high school?"

"Oh no," said Jan. Miss Rohl. "I always liked English class. I was real lucky, 'cause in my junior and senior year both, we had real good teachers for English. They had the most interesting classes you can imagine. Not like—" she stopped, swallowing.

"Not like this one?" suggested Harry.

"Well, actually, no. I mean, your class is interesting, but English itself is kind of dull. But in high school we never worried about that. I mean we got to discuss important questions, like 'What is the true American Spirit?' and 'Sportsmanship in Life and Sports.' We even got to watch television in class. We heard all of President Johnson's speeches last year."

"President Johnson is living proof that an inability to speak English is no obstacle to success," said Harry sadly.

Miss Rohl drew back, blinking. She was shocked and hurt. "In *my* opinion, President Johnson is the greatest man who ever lived."

The moral crisis was past.

13

He opened his eyes to a gusty Sunday morning. The windowpanes of the old building rattled intermittently, and the maroon rug changed color as the puffball clouds obscured, then revealed, the sun.

On the pillow beside him lay Jan, still sleeping heavily. She was not, he had to admit, a vision of loveliness at this moment. Fictional heroines always lay surrounded by an erotic radiance, skins glowing, soft locks cascading in a careless but artistic framing of love-softened features. It's a pity such a beautiful lie cannot be made to live.

The real woman beside him lay with her face partly enveloped by her tangled brown hair. By contrast her skin seemed colorless, lacking lipstick, the wide gray eyes blankly lidded. In the pallor of sleep the freckles of girlhood were still apparent across the bridge of her nose. She breathed with a lightly sibilant sound through loosely parted lips. On her neck below her earlobe was a thin bruised arc where he had bitten her.

She was not the exotic nymph of his adolescent fantasies, nor the tall regal flawless beauty his imagination always offered him when he considered—in the distant, unformed future—the idea of a wife.

Well, at least he had been honest with her. He had told her right from the beginning this was no tryout for marriage. He offered himself this pious reassurance whenever his conscience nagged him

about hurting her. For she loved him, that was obvious—and he didn't really love her.

Did he? No, of course not. Not in the sense of . . . well, you know, in the sense of love being something sudden and beautiful and overpowering. It bothered him that he still thought of capital L Love in terms borrowed from musical comedy (some enchanted evening . . . across a crowded room), but up till now he had nothing better to go on. That elusive thing they sang about just hadn't happened to him.

This affair with Jan had been the most serious attachment of his life, but he was willing to call it exactly what it was: sex. It had turned out that she was a fine girl, plenty mysterious in ways, sometimes moody and quiet, but always honest and fiercely independent. Character attributes were really beside the point, though. What he wanted right from the beginning was to throw her on her back and really put it to her.

Right at this moment, as a matter of fact, he was getting that same urge very powerfully, and it was really hard to understand, since she was not looking seductive and he should have been sated. But there it was, exhibit A. Mind of its own.

Trouble was, Jan was grumpy as hell when awakened. Left to wake in her own sweet time, she was fine in the morning. But she might sleep for hours, and this matter was becoming urgent. Nothing to do but risk it. He began to stroke her bare leg very gently with just the tips of his fingers, caught in the grip of his excitement and shouting wordlessly at her, wake! wake! with her inertness destroying all belief in telepathy.

She made a brief complaining sound and turned away abruptly, flipping her little can at him in an unmistakable rebuff. She drew her knees up and curled nearly into a ball. He lay silent a moment, hearing her regular breathing resume its rhythm. Damn her, he'd show her. Get up, go out for a walk, have breakfast in a restaurant.

But the warmth of her body beneath the covers drew his hand like a magnet onto the flat of her hip. When she did not stiffen nor groan in complaint he slowly brought his body up to hers, raising his knees and bending himself to fit her contour, his chest to her back. She shrugged once in irritation, but he simply held his position and waited. He had her surrounded now. With a slight thrust of his hips

he brought the magic pointer up against the cleft of her body, where her lips were still moist with last night's happiness. He could feel himself expand with the throb of his pulse.

Eyes still closed, she abruptly rotated her shoulders in a waking stretch. Her legs straightened and she rolled over to face him. "You're impossible," she said, the warm burr in her voice telling him to hurry, as she slid her leg up and around his waist. She began to move on him, warm and wet. He forgot he didn't love her.

They spent the afternoon in the park, as they often did. A small apartment littered with the Sunday paper becomes unbearable in the afternoon sunlight. God himself must have been bored before Sunday was over. The park was crowded with the cars of other dull and bewildered urbanites, but there was no one near their secret clearing in an unlandscaped tangle of woods.

Surrounded by eucalyptus and Scotch broom, they spread a blanket and lay down. From the slight rise they could see a glint of silver ocean against the western horizon and the mass of gray billow which lay off the coast like a surly dog. Jan sketched with a pack of child's crayons on a page of plain tablet. Harry tried for a time to read *Moll Flanders,* anticipating his oral, but lost interest and lay gazing up at the bright moist islands drifting over on the freshening wind. The air was damp and a bit cool for comfort. A pervading dread seemed to blow through them with the wind. Monday morning lay in wait, implacably approaching. The early alarm; the dressing in sleepy silence; the cup of coffee forced down tight throats; the drive through the urgent traffic to the gray stone bulk of Jan's office building. And there Jan would disappear from his world, leaving him suddenly and vividly aware of that expanding hollow inside him.

With an odd sense of relief he realized this Monday would be vastly different. From the eight A.M. immigrant class through the four P.M. meeting with Gunnison the day was crammed with an impossible amount of work. Was this what happened to most people? Did they learn to embrace the daily ration of pressing trivia as the antidote to loneliness? Did the punishment become a blessing? Harry reached out and put his hand gently on Jan's leg. He could feel the warmth of her thigh beneath the wool skirt. She smiled

briefly down at him and continued to draw on the cheap tablet a scene of oriental delicacy. Comforted by the feel of her beside him, Harry dozed, the skin of his arms roughened with the cool wind.

It was unlike him to sleep during the day. Jan turned from her drawing and looked down at him, her expression questioning. This way, silent and unmoving, he looked quite different from the intent and active Harry of her thoughts, and quite strangely defenseless. The moment lengthened; the tablet slid from her lap. She continued to examine his face, as though seeing there unsuspected secrets of deep importance. A cloud darkened them. The green streamers of Scotch broom bent with the wind; the smell of ocean and eucalyptus grew stronger in the damp air. The fog crept toward the sand. From far off the raucous cry of a peacock rasped on the moving air.

And still Jan gazed at the sleeping face, her eyes unblinking, her look at once remote and intimate. She was filled with wordless questions, so that if there was a sound in her mind at all it was the single word *why?* Harry knew all the words, he was never at a loss to express the most complex and recondite problems. He could turn everything into words and, having done so, could manipulate the words so that things seemed to change when actually it was not so. That was why, with Harry so unnaturally silent, she had the need to see him deeply and to explore her feelings with care, as a blind man handles a precious vase. In her face was an infinite and ominous sadness possible only to those who know life directly, without the flawed mirror of language.

At six they drove over the bridge into the county for dinner with Linden and his wife in their recently purchased new home. It was in a hillside development, raised above the status of a tract house by mild variations in design from its neighbors scattered over the knoll. Redwood and glass, decks and cantilevered roofs, low and "Japaneezy" as the neighborhood wives liked to say.

A pitcher of martinis was mixed and waiting, so the opening awkwardness didn't last long. The women examined each other swiftly and came to silent agreement. Wade's wife Tina was prettier than Harry recalled from their first meeting some time back. Possibly marriage—and success—was improving her. After the first drink she set off to show Jan the house while he and Wade had another quick one. From down the hall they could hear parts of sentences

"—will eventually be the nursery . . . lots of lovely closet space—" and Jan's appropriately admiring replies. Wade gestured toward the door.

A rain-warped ping-pong table stood on the patio, and they played a quick game which Harry lost, 21–17. The game revived their thirst and they had another drink. In the warm, brief period of acuity granted by alcohol Harry realized that he was happy to be here, that he liked Wade and didn't know him at all.

"I never have really thanked you for getting me the job."

"Forget it. You're a feather in my cap. Gunnison likes you."

"Does he like anybody?"

"I use the term loosely."

"Christ, I never see him."

"You will if you goof. You'll see him in extreme close-up, jaws working, veins throbbing, spit flying—an impressive sight."

"Speaking from experience?"

"I've caught it now and then. My average is pretty good for somebody who has to work around him all the time. The buyers get it worst."

"He isn't even their boss."

"Not in the organizational table, but in fact. Old Goldheim hasn't really done any work for years. He's so damn fat he'd fall right on his face if they took his desk away. He's never out of his chair. He may be dead for all anybody knows. Gunnison just took over as merchandise manager by default. He's willing to do the extra work for the extra power, so Murvyn lets him. Murvyn doesn't really give a shit about anything except the condition of the greens."

"Why don't the buyers complain?"

"They're scared to. Goldheim'll be pensioned off one of these days, and Gunnison will officially get the job, so they may as well get used to him."

"And then you'll be made Advertising Manager?"

"Probably. Marge Detley has the seniority on me, but the women's department isn't a big enough part of overall volume."

It was amazing to Harry to hear this young man with his future all planned. Wife, house, job—everything coming along nicely. If Goldheim gets retired before Tina gets pregnant so the budget can stay in balance. Wheels within wheels. Something very attractive in all this orderliness. Harry's own life looked like a puzzle assembled

by a patient in the therapy ward, pieces in backward and upside down, no sense of overall design.

They heard the women's heels coming up the hall and across the living room, their mingled voices friendly now, having reached accord in the women's world of linen and wallpaper.

Wade leaned close and whispered urgently, "Listen, just forget the store and the job. Don't talk about it, okay?"

Harry looked surprised, and Linden made a brief slicing motion of his hand. "We've been having a hell of a beef—before you got here."

Harry was even more surprised. "What about?" he asked, forgetting it was none of his business.

"Who knows! Who the hell ever knows what an argument with a woman is about? But the store set it off. I mentioned working late next week, and all of a sudden I don't love her, I love the goddam store."

The women appeared on the patio then, and everyone smiled.

"Fix us another drink, will you, honey?" said Tina, gently massaging Wade's shoulder. All hearts and flowers. Wheels within wheels, all right. Maybe nobody's life was in order.

They all got cordially drunk and laughed a great deal over dinner. Wade and Tina were very entertaining with anecdotes about the Helmers, the neighborhood battlers. Stan Helmer had gotten absolutely *stoned* last Saturday night and had fallen off the boat dock, then had come home dripping wet and had hit Sally when she tried to throw him out. Stan had broken a window and turned the hose on Sally, so she took refuge with the Daltons. But Sara Dalton wasn't home, and everybody wondered how John Dalton had managed to get Sally changed, for she was wet when she went in and dry when she came out.

It was all quite funny, and they were pleasurably tired from laughing when over dessert Tina said, "When are you getting married?"

The question was aimed at Jan, but in the silence which followed Harry was the one who finally answered. "She hasn't asked me yet."

If Tina was embarrassed she carried it off well. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought Wade told me you two were engaged. That shows what a hell of a hostess I am. He's afraid to bring his boss home."

Harry didn't buy the explanation. True, he and Jan didn't act like a first date, but Jan's hands were in evidence all through the meal, and women don't neglect to check the ring.

Whatever the reason behind it, the question marked the turning point of the evening. They stayed for one brandy after coffee. Then during one of the ten-second silences Jan announced that she had to get home to iron a dress for work tomorrow. Nobody tried to detain them, and in a moment they were climbing into Harry's Ford, which looked particularly shabby beside the new station wagon gleaming in the amber spotlight of the carport. Wade and Tina stood arm in arm to wave them off, and Harry couldn't help wondering if their quarrel would resume as soon as they were in the house. The dinner had settled heavily over the martinis, and the single brandy wasn't enough to revive the glow. Squinting against the headlights of the heavy Sunday night traffic, Harry felt himself growing irritable.

"Strictly a casebook study, wasn't it?" he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know. The whole bit. Suburbia. The picture-window view of the neighbors' adultery." His own voice irritated him.

"I didn't mind it," said Jan.

"I didn't either, at the time," said Harry. "But—" he paused then had to say it. "What the hell was behind Tina's crack about when are we getting married?"

"I don't suppose there was anything behind it. A simple question."

Harry let it alone until they were off the curving hill road and onto the freeway, where driving was automatic. He knew he'd be better off to change the subject, but the silence in the car was a challenge.

"I suppose Tina was just looking for somebody to needle. She and Wade were having a big beef before we got there."

"Married people sometimes do that."

"I suppose she told you her side of the matter."

"No, she didn't. I got the impression she was perfectly happy, and she has every reason to be. She's got a good husband and a lovely house." Jan's voice was wearily quiet, almost bored.

"Sure it's a lovely house. It's so nice they made a hundred others just like it."

"Oh shut up!" The violence of her tone startled him like a head-on

collision. He turned to look at her but saw only a set mask in the glare of oncoming headlights.

"Okay. I only meant—"

"I *know* what you meant. You meant poor Wade, what a sucker to be slaving his life away in the old rat race for a bourgeois house and a nagging wife. How lucky you are that'll never happen to *you,* because you're so superior."

The outburst left him without a reply. She had never attacked him like this before. In the raw silence he found himself probing the depths of the horrifying idea that she might be able to see clear through him.

When she spoke again, the anger was out of her voice, but in its place was an even more deadly sarcasm. "I'm sorry, but I'm just dumb enough to see nothing wrong with a three-bedroom two-bath house in a pleasant district. I think I could manage to live there, and if I didn't like the neighbors' adultery, I'd pull the new drapes. Then I'd take off my new dress and get into a nice big bed that doesn't fold down out of the wall, and I'd read a good book until my poor dull husband got home from the office. Or I might even watch television, I'm so middle-class."

Harry was having a lot of trouble swallowing the dry lump high in his throat. "Okay," he said. It seemed like a very long sentence.

She didn't speak again until they were across the bridge and he had taken the turnoff that meant he was driving to her apartment.

"I wish I knew how you see things, Harry. You've got a knack for always sounding in the right. Sometimes I believe you must see it that way, but you can't be that big a hypocrite, can you?"

He hardly remembered letting her out or driving home, but the lights on the litter of Sunday funnies brought him out of his confused inner monologue and back to surface reality. To a battered and bleeding Prince Valiant staring up at him he said, not quite aloud: It was a bitch of a day, wasn't it?

14

Still humiliated by Jan's unfair attack—what could be more unfair than confronting a fraud with the truth?—Harry decided to let events take their course with Miss Janice Rohl. On Tuesday morning he smiled directly at her, praised one of her answers, and gave her a perfect excuse for coming to his desk after he dismissed the class. She was wearing a blue sweater which revealed a B cup, at least.

But opportunity, having knocked, had departed. Miss Rohl passed his desk with a cool smile which said plainly: lips that slander Lyndon shall never touch mine. Good riddance, thought Harry. Damned ignorant quiff, you'd be a lousy lay anyhow. But not being able to believe that, he reversed his field and prided himself on rejecting her obvious offer the previous week. Too smart to get involved with his own students, that was him. And there he was, caught flat-footed by Jan's echoing accusation. The perfect hypocrite.

All right, God damn it. He stared at Fowler's *Modern English Usage* and probed the depths of his depravity. I would love, he grimly admitted, to screw Janice Rohl. She would be a great piece of ass, and I was crazy to let it go by. I would love to have a new station wagon illuminated by amber floodlights. I would rather have a three-bedroom house than a goddam railroad flat. I'd like Wade's thousand a month, and I would not even mind having a go at his wife. But I won't have either one because I'm too timid and I call that timidity morality.

Feeling bitterly depressed by this outburst of honesty, he went to see Dr. Kasper about the looming specter of the Master's oral.

Dr. Kasper took a long look at Harry's sober countenance, cleared his throat portentously, and said: "Sir, human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed." Then, dropping to a normal tone, "Confide in me, friend."

"Nothing serious," said Harry. "Just woman trouble."

"Love is the wisdom of the fool, and the folly of the wise," chanted Kasper.

Harry felt he had dialed a wrong number and ended up talking with a machine. Could he hang up Dr. Kasper by reaching out and gently hooking his left hand over his ear?

Must guard against impulses like that.

"You were going to explain about the Master's oral to me," said Harry. "If I know what to expect, I can prepare for it."

"Ah, yes. The department met yesterday afternoon." Kasper leafed through papers on his desk top. "The date for your oral examination is—let me see—Friday morning, May 25th, from nine till twelve." He smiled reassuringly. "Don't dread it too much. After all, there's a limit to what we can put you through in a mere three hours."

"I can show a lot of ignorance in three hours."

"Or, hopefully, a lot of knowledge," chuckled Kasper. "How are you on Chaucer?"

"Pretty good on *Canterbury Tales*. Fair on *Troilus*. Pretty weak on all the rest."

"Then you might read over the *Romaunt of the Rose* a few times."

"Sweet Jesus. All eight thousand lines of it?"

"Seven thousand six hundred ninety-six, to be exact," said Kasper. "It's being wrong on little details like that which makes a bad impression."

"But there's considerable doubt Chaucer even wrote that."

"Not in the mind of Dr. Ramsgate, who will examine you on Chaucer. I'll admit I found the *Romaunt* a bit dull myself, but you'll go over big with Ramsgate if you can quote a bit of it. How's your Chaucerian English?"

"Middling."

Kasper leaned back and gave his booming Johnsonian laugh.

"Very good, very good. How's your Elizabethan period?"

"Strong on Shakespeare. Fair on Marlowe and Bacon. Some Ben Jonson."

"How about Spenser's *Faerie Queene*?"

"I waded through it once."

Dr. Kasper frowned. "I'd avoid that term 'waded' around Dr. Hesselwhite. He considers Spenser the epitome of the Renaissance impulse in England. Better know the broad outline and all the characters of the *Faerie Queene*. Hesselwhite is also fond of *Prothalamion*."

"I'll recite it. 'Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song.'"

Kasper smiled. "I see my faith in you was not misplaced. I have told the department that you are the most interesting Master's candidate we have seen in many a year. They have high expectations."

"Thanks a lot."

"Not at all. What is your feeling about the seventeenth century?"

"I'm glad it's over."

Dr. Kasper-Johnson smiled. "The virtue of the seventeenth century was that it paved the way for the eighteenth. Made it possible —more, literally inevitable. Out of chaos, order. But of the voices of chaos you will be expected to show familiarity with Milton, Bunyan, Dryden, the Cavalier Poets—oh, and Pepys, of course."

"Of course. Who'll ask the questions?"

"Dr. Sachs. He has a special fondness for *Paradise Regained*."

"He would."

"You must understand his position. It is easy for any amateur scholar to like *Paradise Lost*. It takes a professional Miltonian to appreciate the later work. Read it over a few times."

Harry nodded. Read *Paradise Regained* a few times. Sure.

"As far as the eighteenth century is concerned," said Kasper, "I'm certain you have few worries. You've already demonstrated a speaking acquaintance with Pope and Johnson, the giants of the time. I'll also have to ask you about Addison and Steele, the novels of Defoe—in fact the influence of Defoe as the originator of the novel. And Swift. You've read all of Swift, of course. We may touch briefly on James Thomson. Also Collins and Gray, possibly Chatterton. A few poems by each should see you through. As for the latter part of

the century, we'll talk of Boswell, Goldsmith, Gibbon, Burke, Cowper, Blake, Burns—have we forgotten anyone?"

"How about George Crabbe?"

"Yes, of course, Crabbe. Perhaps a question or so about *The Village.* Thank you for reminding me."

That damned incurable joker within, always making more trouble. Why couldn't he learn to keep his mouth shut?

"Now, much as we both hate the prospect, comes the Romantic Revival, the Victorian Age, then all the horrors of the Twentieth Century. If it's all the same to you, Harry, I'd rather not have to name names in these disgraceful periods. With the exception of the sainted Coleridge, that lone beacon of intelligence in a sea of maudlin sentimentality."

"Just tell me who'll be on the examining board."

"Dr. Spatley will handle the Romantics and the Victorians. Quite a span, but since most of it is garbage, that doesn't matter. I hear he particularly admires Byron. You might affect a limp. I can't honestly advise you to *read* Byron, but you may be asked."

"I was young once. I've read Byron."

Kasper gave a delicate shudder. "No confessions, please. It is even quite possible that you may be questioned about such people as Ruskin and Landor. Not to mention sweet Alfred, Lord Tennyson."

"How about Matthew Arnold?"

"An educated man at least. If you can concentrate on him when you discourse on the Victorians, you will save me considerable heartburn."

"I'll recite *Dover Beach.*"

"An admirable choice. Johnson himself would have liked that poem. It has some sense of restraint and form. As for the Twentieth Century, I presume you've read it thoroughly."

"I have."

"What else can one expect? It's like children with comic magazines. When the stuff lies about everywhere it's bound to be picked up and read. Dr. McIntyre will ask the questions. He's new in the department, so I don't know his chimeras." Kasper paused, searching for an apt quote to round off the interview.

"I guess that about covers it," said Harry. "Frankly, it doesn't seem possible to read everything in the time I have left."

Kasper smiled. He had the quote. "Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." A vest-quivering chuckle. "And you have more than a fortnight."

Harry walked down the hall, keeping an eye out for Nick Philbert. If Nick offered a chance to shoot up today, he just might accept. He was due at the ad office this afternoon, but—suddenly he had a spasm of fear. He stopped, took out his wallet and fished out the tiny calendar behind the plastic. There it was, circled in red, the Big Carnival of Stylewise Inc.—May 21–26. Friday the 25th was the oral.

He tried to pull a Kasper, but in six centuries of English literature he could not find the solacing line, the apt response.

"Balls!" he said.

15

Elwin Brassard Gunnison (E.B. to his equals in the firm; That Bastard to his underlings) was a man born out of his time. He should have been an English landed squire, riding to hounds, slapping his meaty thigh with a riding crop, giving the grooms a backhand now and then to keep them awake, and spreading the pox among the daughters of his peasantry.

Stuck with modern America, E.B. had become a mere Advertising Manager, reduced to shouting at buyers, hammering on his desk with a steel ruler for punctuation, and clandestinely banging ambitious salesgirls after the annual Christmas party. Yet he carried himself well. He was six-one and a half (a perfect 42 long, the suit buyer would have said), and his brushy mustache gave his beefy face a certain dignity, even though the gray had to be touched up every week. As for the ruddy complexion, that might be athleticism as well as alcohol, at least from a distance which blended the capillaries into the coarse skin. When he was jovial he exuded a heartiness that filled an office, and when he was not jovial, he exuded then, too. He had that elusive quality so dear to the corporation, leadership; the ability to make men quiver and women weep, the ability to get idiotic things done without better minds taking time to think them over.

Facing Linden and Harry across his desk this Tuesday morning, E.B. was not jovial. The morning had started out badly; the boys' department buyer had been on the pipe the minute the doors opened, bitching that women were all over the damn floor, buying

play suits from the ad in the morning paper. The hitch was that the play suits should be selling for three ninety-five and the gahdam ad said one ninety-five. They were getting scalped on every sale. If the boys' department hadn't been up three flights, Gunnison would have personally walked up and kicked the buyer's ass for him for being too dumb to proofread copy on ads for his department. And while he was at it he would have flogged the department floor-manager for being too stupid to hide the frigging play suits and say they were sold out. Well, that would all be done later, at leisure. The ad had been written by Grady Woods, and he, fortunately, was not only available on this floor, he came running when Gunnison whistled. So Gunnison was still picking bits of Grady out of his teeth as he glowered across at Harry and said:

"All right, just how the gahdam hell are we going to get every shithead on Market Street to come through this store during Carnival Week? Tell me about Carnival Week. Make me pee my pants over the very thought of Carnival Week."

"You don't look the emotional type," said Harry.

"Try me. Make me go all to pieces."

"Well, we've got full-page ads in every paper to start off Monday the 21st. Also a sound truck covered with models in swim suits touring the whole downtown area. Girls giving handout programs on all four corners outside the store. Free coupons at the door for the big merchandise drawing at four P.M. daily. A live talent show at noon on the stage we'll build at one end of the main floor. Free balloons in the kids' department. Free cosmetic samples in the women's department. Taped carnival music over speakers covering every floor, with spot announcements of daily specials . . ." Harry paused, worried by Gunnison's total lack of enthusiasm. "I guess that covers it. Oh, yeah. Live trout fishing in the sports department."

Gunnison tilted his swivel chair upright, his feet hitting the floor with a smack. "*Live trout* fishing?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah."

"Impossible!"

"We're doing it."

"You can't get a license for that!"

"We don't need one just to run it a week. So long as we don't charge. I asked Fish and Game."

"Where do you keep the gahdam fish?"

"In a tank. A plastic swim pool manufacturer is willing to set one up free for publicity in the ads we run."

Gunnison glared from Harry to Linden as though suspecting a hoax. "The floor won't stand the weight," he said grimly.

"It's in the basement," reminded Linden. "Solid concrete."

Gunnison gave up reluctantly. "Where can you get the fish?"

"They'll be trucked in from a commercial hatchery," said Harry. "We can get up to five hundred a day at ten cents apiece."

Gunnison banged his desk with the metal ruler suddenly, sending a shock up Harry's spine. He tensed himself for the chewing out.

"That's one hell of a great idea!" said E.B. He was jovial. "Until you said that, I thought you'd been screwing the dog on this project. What the hell does anybody care about free balloons! Or free lipstick! Or live talent shows! I can imagine what kind of talent you can get on our budget. Strictly amateur night at the P.T.A. meeting. But trout fishing—by God!—where else downtown can you get that!"

"Harry thought of it," said Linden. "And he worked out the deal with the swimming pool outfit."

"Well, by God, if you two want to keep your jobs just see to it that I catch the first trout!" roared Gunnison, then laughed.

"Be here Monday morning before opening time," said Linden, rising. "We'll guarantee you a limit, every one ten inches or better."

Harry, prepared for a long and rocky session, was surprised to catch Wade's unmistakable signal to exit. He gathered up the folder he had brought mainly for appearance and drifted toward the doorway. There were a couple of good-natured questions about the budget, with Linden's prompt reassurance that they were well under the limit. Then they were standing in the free air of the hallway.

When they were twenty yards down the corridor Harry said quietly, "That was shorter than I expected."

"Always quit while you're winning. That's a lesson I've learned painfully with Gunnison."

"I thought we'd have to fight over every step of the program."

"It looked that way at first. But all of a sudden he figured we knew what we were doing, so he doesn't care about the details."

"Who'd have guessed that he's a fishing nut?" said Harry.

"Not I. It seems too human." Linden laughed abruptly. "He really did pee his pants, didn't he."

Harry took Ed Fox to lunch on the expense account to work out the schedule of sports celebrity appearances during Carnival Week. Fox had been quite chummy with Harry since his big scoop on the Hole-In-One tournament. Fox's paper had given the tournament good coverage and had even let the name Stylewise slip into print occasionally. So it was to Fox that Harry went for a few name athletes available for public appearance at no great cost.

"Save your money," said Fox, sipping his after-lunch liqueur, a Metaxa. "Don't even offer to pay 'em. You'll just make hard feelings over who gets how much."

"Will you be able to get anybody for free?"

Fox waved his hand in a munificent gesture. "Don't worry. No athlete wants to risk a bad press. The papers can murder a good player if they get down on him. Just tell me what you want."

"We'll need at least two names a day for five days."

"Easy. How about Saturday?"

"Gunnison figures we can skip the live show on Saturday. It's a busy day anyhow, and all the other Carnival jazz will still be around—music, models, prize drawings and so on."

"Okay. Well, figure one day for baseball, one day for football, then we fill out the other three days with a mixed bag."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean one day we get the center off the pro basketball team and a jockey to go with him. It makes a nice combination."

"Great. That leaves us two days to go."

Fox considered. "The wrestling matches are still a big draw. Maybe we could get some name fighter up from L.A. and put a boxer and wrestler into an argument about which is toughest. Like it?"

"Pure corn, but it might be entertaining. That leaves Friday."

Fox finished his Metaxa and signaled the waiter. "Well, what haven't we used? Tennis—ice hockey—road racing—"

Harry shook his head. "Those things are fun to watch, but we've got no big names. We've got to be able to put it in an ad and draw people in. Nobody wants to look at a driver not driving."

"Swimming? . . . Track? I could get you a four-minute miler."

"Nobody cares, Ed. The world is full of four-minute milers now. Nobody knows track events anyhow—unless we can demonstrate. If we could show some guy vaulting sixteen feet, I'd say great."

Fox snapped his fingers. "I got it. You want a demonstration. I'll get Mike Montrose to lift weights. Impressive as hell. He's a former world champion—got a health studio now. He'd love the publicity."

A startled voice spoke behind Harry's left ear. "Mike Montrose—the mad rapist!"

Fox looked up, shocked. Harry turned, fearing the worst, and he was not mistaken. "Hello, Jake," he said. "Ed Fox . . . Jake Summers."

Fox nodded and extended a hand, which Jake grasped fervently and pumped. "Not *the* Ed Fox! I never miss your column. Nev-er miss-it!" It was impossible to believe Jake, yet impossible to doubt such blatant sincerity. He pulled a chair close and sat down facing Fox, his eyes never leaving Ed's face. "You don't have to print what I said about Mike. It's not really news, everybody knows about him. Besides, the girl was asking for it. Served her right. She had triplets."

The waiter brought another Metaxa, setting it down between Ed and Jake. Without hesitation Jake picked it up and drank it off. The waiter, hardened by years of bar service, let his jaw drop. There was a momentary silence, while everyone waited. Jake licked his lips. "Very nice," he said. "Why don't we all have another one?"

"Didn't it, uh, burn a little as it went down?" asked Fox.

"Burn? Of course not. It's a very mild wine. Port, isn't it?"

The waiter leaned toward Jake deferentially. "It's Metaxa, sir. A very potent Greek brandy."

Jake looked at the waiter solemnly, his face slowly altering to a look of loving pity. Abruptly he sprang to his feet. "Dad! Oh, Dad, you needn't pretend you don't know me. I love you, even in your fallen state." He embraced the stunned waiter and kissed him on both cheeks. Released, the waiter backed off like a sand crab, knocked over a chair at a nearby table, then scuttled for the kitchen. Jake soberly resumed his seat and turned a look of pure scientific

inquiry on Fox. "Tell me, Ed, do you believe that sado-masochism is the chief motivation of participants in body-contact sports?"

"Well, I—"

"And how about the spectator? Is it a sublimation of primitive brutality that sends him to the arena, or is it his need for the ritualized destruction which has disappeared from our emasculated religious rites?"

"Well, you see—"

"A writer of your stature really shouldn't be confined to merely reporting scores and statistics. After all, a machine can do that. What you owe your readers is an examination of the inner structure of sports, the meaning of the symbolism. Is the bat a phallic symbol? Why is a football shaped like a uterus, or vice versa?"

Fox stared with a fixed, helpless smile. Harry came to the rescue. "How's Myra, Jake?"

"She left me."

"Too bad."

"Yeah, I miss her. I was pretty hard up for a while." Jake lapsed into sudden silence, oppressed by unknown thoughts.

Harry leaned across the table. "Look, Ed, we ought to get settled on a few of our sports stars, so we can rough in the programs."

Fox nodded, relieved to be back to reality. "Right. Say a couple Giants for opening day. It's timely, and the front office always cooperates. We can get whoever's hot by then."

"Good."

"Tuesday, say the basketball center and some jockey—I think I can get Fulkerson. He's a good talker."

"He's a junky," said Jake offhand to the table.

"I beg your pardon?" said Fox.

Jake looked up from the napkin he was doodling on. "A junky. Like, you know, with heroeeen. A junky jockey. Bad habit."

"I never heard that before."

"Everybody knows it," said Jake. "It's because he's frustrated. His size, you know."

"You mean he resents being small?"

Jake shook his head. "No, no. He got too *big*. He wanted to be a midget and get into show biz. He told me himself."

Fox gave Harry a look. "Your friend has quite a sense of humor."

"How about a couple football players for Wednesday," said Harry.

"Okay. I'll get a lineman and a back from the 49'ers. Probably Fitzhugh and Garley." He turned to Jake sarcastically. "Unless you know something about them."

"Like what?" asked Jake mildly.

"Like maybe they're mad rapists and dope addicts."

"Are they? That's interesting. I'll remember that." Jake bent over his napkin again, his hand shielding the work of his pencil.

"Thursday the boxer and the wrestler, okay?" said Harry.

"Right. I'll have to check to see who we can get then. And for Friday, how about the weightlifting bit? I've seen Mike work out, and it's pretty impressive."

"I think we'll skip that, all things considered," said Harry.

Fox was put out. "I suppose you believe that Fulkerson is really a junky, too? Is that it?"

"He's got a bigger habit than even Ronnie Reagan," said Jake quietly.

"Oh, shit, I give up," said Fox.

"Let's leave Friday open for now. We'll try to come up with something special. I'll be in touch with you." Harry reached for the check.

"Later, man," said Jake suddenly to Harry. He stood up and bowed deeply toward Fox. "Stay in there swinging, baby. Fight, team, fight." The waiter saw him heading for the door and quickly put three tables between them. Jake blew him a kiss from the doorway.

"You've really got some weird friends," said Fox earnestly.

"Yeah. And some quiet ones, like Jake."

Then their eyes lit on the napkin Jake had been doodling on. From the white linen the face of Ed Fox looked up at them. Or the face of which Fox wore only the pale echo. It was not a caricature, for there was no distortion. Jake had simply drawn the qualities behind the mask: the shrewdness back of the smile, the greed in the furrowed eyebrows, the egotism harbored in the aggressive curve of nose.

Fox stared at himself, fascinated. Then he picked up the napkin, folded it carefully and slid it into his pocket. "That crazy bastard's got talent," he said. "He could go places. Somebody oughta take him in hand and straighten him out."

16

Dean Chesney explored his bridgework with his tongue, cleared his throat softly, then said: "We, uh, seem, uh, to have discovered a slight oversight, uh, here."

All the skin of Dean Chesney's face had been gathered tightly from the point of his chin to his wispily crowned skull, stretched thin over the bones of his face, gathered and let fall in the looping crescents beneath his eyes. The weight of these multiple folds of skin pulled the lower eyelid down, giving Dean Chesney the eyes of a bloodhound in the head of an early Egyptian mummy. The eyes gazed forlornly at Harry while the thin bloodless lips quirked in a businesslike smile.

"What have I forgotten to do?" asked Harry. It was like one of those recurring dreams in which the mysterious gatekeeper demands the long-forgotten password to freedom.

"You, uh—you seem not, uh—you haven't signed the loyalty oath." Dean Chesney spit out the distasteful words in a sudden burst.

"Oh, that!" said Harry, relief all but choking him. Let us thank sweet Christ none of my grave sins has been discovered.

"Yes. That." said Dr. Willhunt. Sneaky little communist spy, now we've got you dead to rights, said his smile.

"You, uh, realize the awkward position this, uh, puts the college in. After all, you are listed as a temporary member of the, uh,

faculty. Even though you, uh, only teach—uh, corrective—English."

"The college has no recourse but to suspend your practice-teaching activities, so long as you refuse to sign the oath. The state legislature has spelled out our policy very plainly on that point," said Willhunt. He wanted to make it plenty clear to Dean Chesney that *he* wasn't trying to shield this enemy agent.

"Uh," said Dean Chesney. "No one could be, uh, more in favor of the, uh, principle of academic freedom than, uh, I. However."

"We must face realities," supplied Willhunt helpfully.

"Yes. We do, uh, receive our funds from the duly constituted state government, and we are, uh, morally obligated, so to speak, to pledge our support to that, uh, form of government."

"Unless, of course," suggested Willhunt, "you have some sort of political commitment which prevents your signing."

"Or some, uh, insuperable barrier of conscience against, uh, constraining the mind to a single point of view," said Dean Chesney.

They both looked at Harry as the silence lengthened. He felt a bit like Heifetz at the moment when the whole orchestra stops and everybody looks to the soloist for the cadenza.

"I'll sign," he said. "Sure. Why not?"

Willhunt looked definitely let down, but Dean Chesney was clearly relieved. Poor old gasbag, thought Harry kindly, caught between the witch-burners of the legislature and the high-principled sophists of the faculty. At an age when looming retirement and the state of his bowels were of more intimate concern than the great issue of moral compulsion and the international communist conspiracy. Chesney was already sliding the appropriate form across the desk to Harry.

"Perhaps you are not fully aware of the implications of signing this oath," said Dr. Willhunt.

"Tell me," said Harry, getting out his lifetime pen.

"Falsifying a loyalty oath is punishable as perjury."

"Lucky for me I'm not a dirty red," said Harry, signing with a flourish. "Although if I were trying to overthrow this government by force and violence, a little perjury wouldn't bother me."

There was a momentary silence as Harry slid the oath back across the desk to Dean Chesney.

"What you are saying," Willhunt drawled in a sing-song reserved

for weighty hypotheses, "is that you would sign this oath even if you *were* a communist."

"I'd have been first in line the day they were passed out."

"This, then, implies," Willhunt intoned carefully, "that your signing of the oath today carries no assurance of your loyalty."

"The fact that I'm late carries plenty," said Harry. "Believe me, if I were in the pay of Moscow I'd have had this thing signed long ago. And I'd have an old Goldwater sign on my car bumper, not to mention little decals of American flags all over the windows."

"You are saying flatly that you are amoral," said Willhunt.

"I'm saying it would take a very dumb subversive to make a public issue over signing this piece of paper. So dumb, in fact, that he'd be harmless."

"An, uh, interesting speculation, gentlemen. But we, uh, have other matters to discuss," said Dean Chesney. Obviously he didn't give a damn about the theoretical ramifications of loyalty oaths. He had to get a signature on a piece of paper, and now he had it. He fiddled around in his top drawer and drew out another folder. "I have here, uh, the results of the recent, uh, tests given to the students in the Corrective English classes."

Harry's sphincter tightened. What a day this was turning into.

"The, uh, results show," said Chesney, then bent to read what the results showed, "that, uh, each of the students in the eight A.M. sessions had, uh, marked improvement." He looked up at Harry with surprise in the bloodhound eyes. Then he bent to the folder again. "The other four sections of Corrective English showed, uh, no such uniform results. Some students improved, and, uh, some students actually declined in their, uh, performance."

Wilhunt was looking at Harry with a wild surmise, like a cop spotting a known safecracker in a bank. Dean Chesney continued to study the test results for a moment, then he beamed at Harry.

"You, uh, seem to have achieved, uh, remarkable results."

Harry shrugged modestly. "I've only done what Dr. Willhunt told me. He's the one who deserves the credit."

Willhunt did a passable imitation of the ugly bridesmaid who suddenly finds she has caught the bouquet. He smiled and simpered.

"You are, uh, both to be congratulated," said Chesney. "It rather, uh, grieves me now to take up the unfortunate matter of your repeated absences." He looked hopefully at Harry for some plausible excuse.

"I realize my attendance at some of my lecture classes has been rather sporadic," said Harry. "I've been doing a lot of intensive reading for my Master's oral, coming up soon. And of course I've spent a great deal of time preparing my teaching lessons for English A." He waited for lightning to strike him, but God was merciful today. In truth he had given up any sort of lesson preparation a month ago, when the big Carnival promotion started getting hot.

Dean Chesney looked at Willhunt, who began to suspect the method in Harry's madness. "Well, in view of the unusual improvement in Harry's classes, I'm willing to overlook a few absences," said Willhunt. "Really thorough lesson preparation can be very time-consuming."

"Perhaps you, uh, can be more regular in attendance these, uh, last few weeks of the semester," suggested Dean Chesney.

"I'll certainly try." I'll be lucky to appear at all.

Dean Chesney rose, uncoiling his long bony frame from behind the desk. "I'm, uh, delighted to have cleared up all these, uh, matters. Again, my congratulations to you both on a job, uh, well done."

Harry was already sidling toward the door, happy to escape, but Willhunt wanted to bask in Chesney's approval a bit longer. "Isn't that a first edition of Milton?" he cried in admiration, pointing at the open book on Chesney's desk.

"Why, uh, yes," said Chesney, preening himself. "It's the, uh, 1667 edition of *Paradise Lost*. Quite a valuable item."

Willhunt made bibliophile noises over Milton while Harry lounged against the desk, surreptitiously scratching his ass and looking for the moment to bow out gracefully.

"If you are, uh, fascinated by first editions," said Chesney, "I have an, uh, interesting Shakespeare Quarto over here." He left the desk and ambled across the spacious office toward a bookshelf which covered most of one wall.

Then Willhunt had his big idea. It must have been the air of good fellowship that brought it on, the feeling of great minds sharing

their treasures, having fun together. From his coat pocket he brought out the open bottle with its plastic ink blot, the one Harry had seen on his desk. He caught Harry's eye, tipped him a broad wink and pointed briefly at Chesney's retreating back.

Harry looked blank, refusing to make himself a conspirator with Willhunt. But Willhunt didn't care. He quickly laid out the ink blot across the crinkly page, obscuring fifty lines or so of Milton.

"I was, uh, certain I had the Quarto here somewhere," mumbled Chesney from the shelf. "Unless I, uh, took it home."

Willhunt moved toward the bookshelf, repressing a titter. "I'm afraid I've just done a terribly clumsy thing," he said.

"No, I don't, uh, think I took it home," said Chesney, still running his bloodhound eye over the massed books.

From the instant he had the idea, Harry fought it. His reverence for books cried out in anguish. But it was the opportunity of a lifetime, the chance that never comes again. A quick look told him that Chesney and Willhunt were both busy, Chesney searching foggily for his precious Quarto, Willhunt building his fake apology, gilding the gag. Harry reached out, deftly snapped the plastic ink blot off the overturned bottle. Then he took his genuine lifetime fountain pen, squeezed the button, and squirted a large black gleaming puddle over Milton's iron-clad verse.

"You *what*?" piped Chesney, as Willhunt's words finally soaked in.

"I'm terribly sorry," simpered Willhunt, fighting back a smile. "I don't know how it happened. I simply dropped the bottle."

Harry drifted casually toward the door. Chesney clattered over to his desk and stood staring, transfixed, at the mutilated page. A soprano giggle squirted through the gleaming teeth of Dr. Willhunt. Chesney turned to glare at him as though he had gone mad.

"It looks so *real*," gasped Willhunt, openly laughing now.

A heretofore unsuspected vein was throbbing under the taut skin of Dean Chesney's temple. "You're insane!" he cried.

"No, look," said Willhunt, getting his breath. "It's just a joke. See?" He reached to pick up the ink blot. His fingers trailed black ribbons across the desk top. The look on his face was something Harry would cherish all his life.

"You imbecile!" grated Chesney. "Get out of my office before I forget all the laws of tenure. Get out of here and stay out!"

Harry beat Willhunt to the door by five yards and was well down the hall when he heard the door slam. Amazing how a little rage cleared up the old boy's speech.

17

Under Harry's second knock the door pulled back to reveal Pete Dalwin's bony face and cheerful grin. As he recognized Harry, a hint of stiffness crept into Pete's grin; it looked pasted on.

"Hi, Pete. You busy?"

"Uh, not exactly. What's up?"

"Me. Can I come in?"

"Well, uh, sure. May as well." He pulled the door wide, then closed it after Harry, following him down the short entrance hall like a pup snapping at his heels with an urgent message. "Funny you'd drop in right now—I mean, we've got company, and—"

Harry stood in the open archway to the living room, feet abruptly frozen, a rising coldness in his gut.

"Surprise," said Pete.

Jan was sitting on the couch along the opposite wall, a beer glass in her hand. Right against her—not beside her, dammit, but right *against* her—sat some dirty bastard Harry didn't know. Oh, he was a son of a bitch. That was plain at a glance. He had those nice, regular, handsome features that are so detestable and that thick curly head of blondish hair so inappropriate in a man. Even a dimple in his chin—by God, I bet you could hide a dill pickle in it. He was standing now, showing a misleading politeness that never for an instant could mask the fact that he was an uncouth, illiterate lecher. Harry could see right through him.

"How do you do. Nice to meet you," this turd was saying.

Harry reached out and shook the extended hand. How awful; a warm, strong hard which almost gave the illusion of genuine masculine friendliness. Have to watch this tricky rape suspect. With a qualm Harry saw that this beast was perhaps two inches taller than himself. But of course a decadent slob like this could never withstand the swarming body attack Harry would rain on him. His muscles stiffened with the effort as his mind pounded blows on stomach, kidney, and liver, with a good kick in the pancreas after the oaf went down.

"Dick's an old classmate from pre-med," chattered Pete, his voice trying to chip away the ice forming on Harry's face. "We used to cut up frogs together."

"I don't doubt it," said Harry. He looked the type. A dick, all right, a born frog-cutter. Harry forced himself to look at Jan, but she was looking at Dick. Of all the places in this world to look, all the sights pleasing to the eye and informative to the mind, she had to be looking at this killer of God's harmless little creatures. How could she *stand* this tall, well-dressed, handsome, polite—Dick. What a name! It sent shudders up the spine.

On wooden legs he was walking, showing a wooden smile to Pete's wife Gwen as he passed her (thank God she was here to keep that big brute's pants buttoned) and then he was standing in the kitchen with Pete, watching him pour beer. The glare of the white walls hurt his eyes and reminded him he had been drunk when he knocked on the door a few seconds ago. Or was it minutes? Or years?

Pete was nervously embarrassed, the bottle neck knocking against the glass. Glad that fine hand will never cut on my cerebrum. Harry picked up an empty glass, reached into the cupboard where he knew the bourbon was kept, and poured himself a short one.

"We didn't really arrange this, old buddy," said Pete.

"You mean my dropping in?"

"No, I mean the—" he couldn't say it. He waved vaguely to indicate the potential orgy in the front room.

"An old friend of yours, huh?"

Pete's grin twitched. "We did the first year of med school together. I haven't seen him much since then."

Hopefully: "Flunked out?"

"Changed to dentistry."

"I should have guessed." Just the type to get his kicks by grinding some helpless girl's molars down to her gum line. A wicked hand with the procaine needle. The child limp in the dentist chair, the stealthy click of the door lock. He could see it all.

"I think Jan met him at some get-together here."

Get-together. What an obscene word.

Pete was standing there with the beer glasses full, waiting until Harry felt like going back into that living room. Harry raised the glass, drank off the bourbon, then extended an arm.

"After you, doctor."

"You all right?"

"Fine." Except for chest paralysis and a roaring in my ears.

They were back in the living room. Something had happened to subtly alter the atmosphere. Somebody had told tricky Dick the cause of the bad vibrations. But they didn't have time to tell him enough, for he was asking questions.

"Are you in medicine, Harry?"

"No. I'm a Christian Scientist."

Handsome Dick started just perceptibly, then got a look from Jan that told him Harry was kidding. He brought off a nice smile.

"I just wondered—I mean, you being a friend of Pete and Gwen."

"Pete and I were old undergrad frat brothers. We used to cut up girls together."

The look on Jan's face gave Harry a stomach ache. She was uncomfortable, unhappy. For him? Was he making a fool of himself? Better cool it. After all, the woods are full of good lays. What did he care about her, anyhow?

In the lengthening silence he realized they were all looking at him, awaiting a reply. Gwen had been talking to him.

"I'm sorry, I missed the question. Thinking about a new formula to synthesize saliva."

"I said, what have you been doing lately?"

"Working in the old ad game. Building a fortune."

"Advertising?" Gwen was puzzled. "What about your credential?"

"I'm doing that with my left hand."

"Sounds like you're a busy boy," chimed in dimpled Dick.

Harry studied him, which was hard, because the damn couch was

beginning to slide to the left, though it never got anywhere. "I haven't had much time to spare," he said. "I've apparently lost touch with some of my affairs."

"What's you happen to drop in on us?" asked Pete, falling into his old speech habits. He caught a look from Gwen. "I mean, not that we're not glad to have you, but how come?"

"Cause I was depressed. And drunk."

"Are you better now?" asked Jan quietly.

Harry looked at her. "I'm euphoric now." Then he said what he knew he shouldn't say. "I called your place, but your roommate said you were working late."

"She made a mistake."

"She lied. She must have thought there was something shameful about swilling beer with a dentist."

"If you're trying to be obnoxious," said well-dressed Dick, "then you're succeeding."

Harry stared at him, trying to get him to hold still. Bang! Bang! said the television one floor below. A horse whinnied. "I thought," said Harry, "I would enjoy matching wits with you and cutting you to ribbons. But I can't attack an unarmed man."

"Decent of you," said Dick.

"I think instead I'll just—as we say in the medical profession—knock your balls off." Harry shoved himself out of the chair and took two long steps that put him in front of the couch. Dick sat still, forcing a grin. For an instant Harry saw himself as they saw him, and the pain made him wild. "Come on, God dammit, stand up!"

"I'm a guest in Pete's house. I'm not going to break up his place brawling with a drunk."

"I can show you a door that leads outside."

Dick hesitated. "No thanks. We start fighting in the street and we end up in the drunk tank. Besides, why should I fight? You're the one who's out."

All too painfully true. And not a thing to be done about it. If only the miserable furniture would stop skimming around the edges of his vision. And to cap the tragedy, he had to take a leak.

"I do believe you're chickenshit," said Harry.

"Hey, now listen—" Pete laid a hand on his shoulder.

Harry turned, glanced from Pete to Gwen. They looked anxious

and embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I beg your pardon." The last word was hard to get out, for some reason. He pushed past Pete and got to the front door with his jaw clenched on what might be either a sob or an explosive yell. As he clattered down the steps he thought: thank Christ I don't really care much about that girl.

18

He had been driving around aimlessly for an hour with the windows down and the cool night air blowing on him, sobering him minute by minute. He was going nowhere in particular, just avoiding the return to his lonely apartment. Drinking was no escape for him; he didn't dig lushing unless there was some fun in it. What he needed was someone to talk with, a distraction.

The light was on behind Jake Summers' door, so Harry knocked. There was a scuttling sound inside—a choked laugh, was it?—then the door cracked and Jake peered out over the night latch chain.

"Ah ha! The Bastard King!"

"No less. I'll touch you and heal you of the evil."

The chain clanked, door swung. Against the far wall was a long window shade, unrolled flat, taped to the concrete. On it was a painting in progress. Harry turned to look at Jake and found a wisp of smoke drifting out from under his loose collar.

"Something about you is on fire, man."

Jake lifted the joint shielded in his palm, dragged deeply and noisily on it, then handed it to Harry. Why not? How could the evening go any worse? He huffed his lungs empty then drew hard on the burning stub. The smoke was hot and acrid, searing his throat.

Jake talked in a pinched voice, holding his breath: "Hmm, I see you are not exactly a novice at this pastime."

"Whatever makes you imagine that?" Harry growled through clenched teeth, rib cage distended, heart pounding.

"You seem to have done in half a stick with one toke. Most unusual in a rank amateur."

"Beginner's luck."

"How long since you last got on?"

"About two years."

"See, it *is* habit forming. You're doing it again." Jake exhaled twin plumes through his nose while his mouth puckered around the joint again, reddening the coal within the white ash. As he handed it back to Harry he said, "How come you went off pot?"

"Snobbism." Harry inhaled deeply. Not so hot this time, the throat anesthetized.

"Like, what?"

"Cults are a drag. All these cool hippies—the dirty-shirt Rotary Club, man."

Jake laughed explosively, coughing, trying to gulp back the precious smoke. He gave it up, clenched the stub between thumbnail and fingernail, mouthed a wind tunnel around it and oxidized it to nothing. From his shirt pocket he produced another, a fat bomber.

"It's good to be back," said Harry, infinitely later, as he exhaled the last toke of the second joint. He had forgotten the view from on high. The muscles behind his ears pulled taut in protest as the phone bell jangled mercilessly for what seemed an hour. Jake picked it up, listened, then spoke rapidly.

"Chingah, ah-oo soka hamali. Da-ee, moka. Kakoosa fungit!"

Harry sat looking at Jake after he hung up the phone and got out a pack of regular cigarettes. "Want a lame?" asked Jake.

"No thanks, I don't smoke." A brief pause. "Uh, say, man—were you talking Chinese over the phone?"

"I don't think so," said Jake, lighting up.

"This must be powerful pot, then."

Jake shrugged. "Some cat keeps calling up here, and that's how *he* sounds, so I make the same sounds back at him. Let *him* figure it." Jake popped a dexy into his mouth, chewed it like a peanut, then offered the prescription bottle to Harry, who declined.

Good old Jake. Why can't I be like him? Harry wondered. Or why couldn't he be any way but the way he was? He had been a different

person as a youth, before he met people like Jake, whose idea of a good time was to shoot one arm full of heroin, the other full of cocaine, then drink a fifth while his wife blew him to the music of Ravi Shankar. Simple pleasures of the poor.

Yes, he had once been quite a naïve, sweet, idealistic lad. And he still meant well, honest to God. But here he was, stoned out of his nut, a condition sure to be frowned on by the State Board of Education. Can't let teachers get high, they might get ahead of the students.

"How's Jan?" asked Jake without warning.

"She's out with a dentist." The words sounded strange, incredible. A funny story he was making up. When Jake laughed, he had to laugh too. But his gut became a tight coil of barbed wire. To change the subject he walked over to look at the painting in progress. It was a wild landscape of tangled vines climbing into a night sky, with a grotesquely elongated female, hands upraised, baying at a blood-red moon. An involuntary shudder went over Harry. Jake, seeing it, laughed a hyena howl.

"Great! You dig it!"

"Yes. It's horrifying."

"I'm getting there, man. My ambition is to paint a picture nobody can look at. One glance and you turn away screaming."

"There must be a great demand for that sort of thing."

"Oh, yes. I get requests every day."

"Tell me, isn't it terribly difficult being a creative artist? Where do you get your inspiration?"

Jake pinched his nostrils in delicate aesthetic deliberation. "The great masterpieces of past centuries are a continual source of delight and stimulation, of course. And so are the drawings I find on the walls of public toilets."

"I saw a nice line in the can at school the other day," said Harry. "It was: Help fight mental illness, or I'll kill you."

Jake laughed, lit another joint, sucked in a huge drag, then stood in silent contemplation as Harry took his turn. Exhaling at last, he voiced a quiet tribute: "No wonder this stuff is illegal."

"Much too good for people. They don't deserve it."

"Think of the unknown genius who discovered pot," said Jake.

"He must have had some disappointments before he hit on it."

Jake grimaced. "Smoking milkweed, skunk cabbage, pine needles—"

"But the biggest drag was tobacco. It not only didn't work, he got hooked and couldn't quit."

Jake shook his head. "Indians conned the whites into tobacco, man, as a way of getting even. The Indians sat around smoking pot in those peace pipes, breaking up at the whites trying to make it on tobacco." Jake snapped on his scarred phonograph and leafed rapidly through his LP collection. "You want Glenn Gould playing Bach, or Thelonius playing Monk?"

"Bach, if it's all the same to you."

Jake put on the *Goldberg Variations,* and they listened in rapt silence for several weeks, perhaps an hour by an unhigh clock. It was not listening, really, it was a trip to a far country where earth, air, and light are merging parts of the tonal spectrum, and you inhabit sound rather than hear it.

"He blows," said Jake when it was over.

Harry knew that Bach—and probably Gould—heard it that way all the time. He hated needing tea to apprehend what was there in the music all the time. Throw away your crutches and learn to walk. But what if you kept falling flat on your face?

A cat jumped in the open window and sauntered across the floor, its walk a ballet performance. "Shall we turn the cat on?" asked Jake. "I do, sometimes. Put a bag over its head and blow smoke in."

"What kind of kicks does it get on?"

Jake shook his head, frowning. "Cat burglar kicks, man. Then holding up gas stations. You know how it is with dope—the craving for excitement, the wild urge for thrills. Hey, it's time for my wife to come home."

"Myra? I thought she left you."

"Oh, this is another one. We got married last week, I think it was."

"Congratulations."

"Wait'll you see her, man. She's *weird.* I think she's insane. But very nice. Sweet."

With foreboding Harry said, "I don't think she'll be too pleased to

find us high out of our skulls, will she? It's the sort of thing that leads to little misunderstandings."

"I don't think she'll notice. I think she takes some kind of pills. Or maybe she's just that way, I can't tell yet." Jake rummaged in the refrigerator, found half a bottle of red wine, tipped it up and drank several swallows.

"You say she'll be home soon?"

"Yeah. She works—somewhere, I don't know. Her name's Joanne."

Harry had the wine bottle tilted to his lips when Joanne came in. Wiping a stray drop from his chin during introductions, he felt at a disadvantage. Jake was giggling, grimacing, pointing at her.

"See, man! Didn't I tell you? Look at her. Too much!"

She smiled from Jake to Harry, her huge violet eyes framed in tight blonde curls which hung to her shoulders, *à la* early Shirley Temple. Her skin was paper white, with red spots of rouge on her cherub cheeks. Jake gave her a husbandly kiss of welcome; she slid her arms around him and clung to him, mouth open and avid. Soon she began running her hands up the back of his neck, through his hair.

"Awfully nice meeting you," said Harry, finishing the wine. They were still locked together as he closed the door behind him.

The night sky was domed, infinite, overpowering in its grandeur. There was a fine edge on the universe, the pot still working in him. That tiny blue light which had spent fifty years traversing empty space now combined in his brain with the leaf grown in Mexico to give him an instant of exquisite pleasure, an awareness of time and distance in which suns grew from cosmic dust, swelled, shrank, exploded, and sent their flickering message to countless earths.

The crash of a bottle against the pavement down on Columbus yanked him back. Down there the tourists were gawking and the Beats were bleating. It was a sad kick, a dead kick, moribund as soon as it had a name and fame. How unfortunate, to make a Movement of nonconformity. Individualists of the world unite!

He was lonely, but the cure was worse than the illness. It was hard to pay the dues when you didn't believe in the passwords. Was there a place in the Teachers' Association for a pre-beat post-hip

loner? He doubted it; that clique would be like any other, a busy little bunch of Ins inventing ways to keep others Out. One-upmanship, as though life were endless and time had no value. But screw all that. He didn't have to join. He'd get straight somehow on his own. It's something just to outgrow being hip.

In the car he discovered he was still too high to go back to his empty apartment. Pot is a double-edged knife, handy for cutting away dead tissue to bare the nerves but capable of inflicting deep wounds. Harry knew that the minute he lay back in the darkness of his empty bed visions of the demon dentist ravishing his Jan would sear his retina. Awful. Never did like to hear a grown man scream.

He drove carefully and skillfully, aware of the speedometer at a safe number, generator charging, oil pressure normal, water temp normal, lights on dim in courtesy to approaching drivers, and gas tank half full. The car was under perfect control at every instant, the steering wheel a part of him, hands reaching through the mechanism right down to the spot where the tires touched asphalt. Red light. Green light. Smooth start. Watch that clown weaving in the outer lane, probably some drunk. Disgusting. There, safely past. No doubt Graham Hill sometimes achieved this level of perfect oneness with his machine.

The only trouble was, he was hopelessly lost. He had no memory of what streets he had taken since leaving Jake's place, no idea in which direction he was going, no evidence on which to construct a recognizable world. He pulled to the curb under a streetlight at a deserted intersection. A fog was descending, and the streetlight hung suspended in a halo of brightness. The names on the street signs were utterly foreign. He started up again, gladly abandoning himself to the pleasure of this trip to nowhere through an unknown city. All too soon he found himself on Fillmore, passing the after-hours club where Nick played jazz. A parking place lay open, and he slid the car neatly into the curb. The thousand mile journey was over, too bad.

"And this is LuAnn," Nick was saying sometime later, "the chick I was telling you about, remember?"

Yeah, I remember. Likes to ball intellectual white cats. And fortunately for us both you see before you the albino Einstein of English Lit. Guaranteed none whiter or smarter. "How do you do," he said.

"I enjoyed your singing. It reminded me of Sarah, without the little unconscious parodies of herself that her technical skill tricks her into."

"Well, thank *you*," said LuAnn. She had a large mouth, especially when she smiled, and wide, heavy-lidded eyes out of the corners of which she liked to look up in mock shyness. The color and sheen of her skin reminded Harry of expensive walnut furniture.

Nick grunted a little goat-like laugh and passed Harry a just-lighted stick. They were in the little turning-on room behind the bandstand, and just breathing what passed for air in here had brought back Harry's high. He passed the stick untouched to the tenor man who stood nearby, his ax dangling from his neck cord.

LuAnn noticed and made a point of it. "It always seemed to me," she said, her rich voice a bit stilted, "that a person of real intelligence wouldn't have any need to be blasting shit all the time."

"Oh, I don't put it down," said Harry. "I'm just not in the mood."

And was damn glad he'd said it, for the tenor man, a big black stud about six-feet-eight, had just exhaled a big lungful on him in case he was trying to come on holy. But LuAnn obviously thought Harry was just being gracious to these poor ignorant goofs too stupid to swing without weed. She put a long-fingered hand on his arm. "Like, what's your gig, daddy? Are you new?"

"Harry's a big brain. He teaches at the college," said Nick, setting him in solid. LuAnn was so impressed she forgot for a moment to look up sideways, but stared straight at him.

"C'mon, Nick, let's go see a cat about a horse," said the tenor man. He started for the door, then paused to give LuAnn a shrewd look not devoid of possessiveness. "You gonna holler this next set?"

"No thanks. You can honk without me." She wasn't scared of him, Harry could see that, so his claim on her must not be serious. Be awkward to find one's gullet slit in a Fillmore bedroom.

"Later, man," said Nick, moving toward the door. "I'm sure you and LuAnn will have a real interesting conversation."

"Don't fall in," growled the tenor man from the doorway.

Her room was on the second floor, over a grocery store, just a few doors down from the club. It was clean and smelled of incense. He thought there might be the awkwardness of coffee or booze to be

offered and declined, some little social amenity to be endured, but LuAnn simply snapped the lock behind them, stepped into his arms and engulfed his mouth in her own. Her tongue was rapid and expert; the roof of her mouth was high and arching, and the unfamiliar taste and feel of her quickly excited him. He was disappointed when she broke away, but it was only to unsnap her skirt and step briskly out of it. She turned for him to unhook the neck of her blouse, then it came quickly off over her head. She draped her things neatly over a chair back, then turned with a look of surprise at finding him still clothed. She unhooked his belt, and holding both sides of it, tugged him playfully toward the bed.

The sheets were crisp from the laundry, and there must have been some kind of plastic mattress cover, for the steady crinkling was like the accompaniment of a distant fire in dry twigs. Harry was afraid her strangeness and fervor would make him too quick, but Jake's wine and the drinks he'd had helped him hold back. From the early way she began to moan with each thrust, it wouldn't take her too long.

It was just good old animal sex, sex for the dirty old thrill of it, bereft of reproductive function (she'd assured him) and unsanctified by mutual affection. It was just writhing, sweaty, thumping old humping, no rhyme or reason, no rich rationalization. Belly to belly and bollocks to buttocks, and doesn't it feel lovely.

And very pointless when it was over. He counted his breaths, and at thirty-two his heart and lungs were settling back to normal. The silence he began to feel as his responsibility, but his vast brilliance had fled, he had ejaculated his very brains, he couldn't even frame a commonplace about the weather. A dumb white boy.

"What do you think of James Baldwin?" she asked abruptly, lifting the onus from him. She was serious, he knew at once. This was her education, her private night school, and, considering the tuition just paid, she was certainly entitled to a complete graduate seminar. But, all aspects considered, he'd prefer to talk about Chaucer.

"C'mon," she urged him. "You can be honest with me."

"Well, Baldwin's okay, I guess. But I wouldn't want him to marry my brother."

"He-he-he-he-he!" She had a high, little-girl laugh. "You hit on it! I read that thing, *Another County*—like, if you're black, you got to

read him, it's like the trade papers—but I got so tired of all those fays and gays jammin' each other I gave up and threw it in the fire. Too much back-door integration for me."

"To be fair, he has written much better things than that novel."

She sat up in bed and lit a cigarette from the bedside table. "Oh, that mother can write sometimes, but he comes on such a full-time professional victim. He's got such *trouble* being black, whoooeee. Some days he must feel so bugged he can't make it down to the bank. Like, I make it singin', y'know, but I don't just sing blues. Sometimes I try to swing."

"You swing. You're a great chick."

She reached over and tickled him gently. "You ever make it with a colored chick before?"

"Nope. You got my cherry."

She giggled again. "I've made it with lots of white cats." Pausing judicially. "You're one of the better ones. But a little inhibited."

"I was holding back so I could last."

"You did fine, especially at the end. Who's the greatest writer you ever read?"

"Shakespeare. Far and away."

"Then who? Name all the best ones."

"Chaucer. Proust. Tolstoy. Cummings. Faulkner, sometimes.

"Here, write those down, will you?" She opened a small drawer in the bedside table and brought out a pad and pencil. He sat up, braced the pad across one knee and wrote, listing certain books after each author. She watched him avidly.

"I could send you some books, if you like," he said.

"No thanks. I mean, that's kind of like you paid me, if you dig."

"Not meant that way."

"I can find 'em in the library. You just write 'em down. You'd be surprised how much I learn that way."

Not a bit. In fact your whole approach to education is just great. Beats the hell out of group dynamics and the unit system, but a class of fifty might prove very hard on the teacher over the long haul. She leaned across him as he continued to list authors and books, her brown-nippled breast moving against his upraised thigh. She giggled.

"Well, well. Look who's alive again so soon."

"Yeah, how about that? Recess time."

"Maybe," she said, sliding over onto him, "I'll come out to the college one of these days and take a class from you."

"Do that." And that. And that.

19

Grady Woods was sitting at his polished desk, shoulders hunched forward, his eyebrows a black line of concentration as he stared at the typewriter. The sheet of copy paper in the roller was blank except for NEW!! across the top. As Harry watched, Grady hit the bang mark again, then rapidly underlined the word, so that now he had NEW!!! With an air of accomplishment, he turned to face Harry.

"Great headline," said Harry. "How did you think of it?"

"Everybody hates a smartass," said Grady. "State your business."

"Linden thought you might knock out the copy for the boys' department ads to run with the Carnival announcements."

Grady made the gesture of a weary diplomat confronted with a new world crisis. "The Carnival's *your* baby. I thought that's why they hired you. Can't you do anything for yourself?"

"They don't trust me with the big important stuff like romper ads. Or double-knee play jeans. I get all choked up with sentiment."

Grady leaned back, lit a filter cigarette, and turned his small, alert features on Harry. "You think I don't know you're after my job?" He exhaled a thin stream of smoke. "You won't get it."

"I couldn't handle it. You've got knack for the language. The way you write—brown, gray, black, sizes S,M,L—that's a talent I'll never have."

"Funny. Very funny. But one of these days you're going to slip up. Then Gunnison is going to eat you alive. I've seen clever boys like you before. And they always fall flat on their face."

Without warning, Harry was pierced with sadness. Perhaps it was Grady calling him a clever boy that did it, for Grady was no more than his own years, though he wore a middle-aged solidity. Harry knew suddenly that he didn't want Grady hating him, for he wished Grady no harm. "Listen, I'm sorry you hate me. I'll write the copy for the boys' department ads if you'll just give me the items."

"Thanks for nothing. I can still handle my own job. Tell Linden I'll give him the ads this afternoon."

Harry wandered down to the end of the office and flopped into a chair in Morton's cubicle. Morton was flipping rapidly through his file of sportcoat drawings, muttering to himself. As Harry came in, he obligingly raised his voice as a token of greeting.

". . . kills me to hear those crazy buyers in the merchandise meeting raving about these exciting brand-new styles, and I can dig out something I drew thirty years ago and they never know the difference. Nothing changes in this business but the customers."

"Tell me, Mort—what is life all about?"

"It beats the crap out of me, Harry." Morton gave a brief grunt of satisfaction as he hauled out a sketchboard drawing. "I never did figure it out, and now it's too damn late to matter. Look at that." He held the sketch up beside the sportcoat on a hanger hooked over the knob of his supply cabinet. "Same thing, or not?"

"Down to the last button."

"Want to go kill some time over coffee?"

"Can't. I'm waiting for Gunnison to blow his little whistle. He wants Linden and me to give him a preview of the Carnival as soon as he's through with the buyers."

"Does he give you a hard time?"

"He hasn't yet. But I can easily see how he might. He scares me when he starts hammering on things with that steel ruler."

Morton lit a cigarette with fingers that trembled visibly. Harry had noticed that Morton had a mild tremor except when he picked up a pen or brush. Then his hand became rock-steady. "Old Elwin used to be a pretty decent sort of guy," he said. "I remember one time we got drunk together at the store Christmas party—he was just an assistant buyer then—and he stole a female dummy out of one of the display windows. We dragged that thing all around town with us that night, and he kept introducing people to it as his

fiancée. All it had on was lingerie and a coat he'd got hold of somewhere." Morton paused, a reminiscent smile softening his face.

"What happened to it?"

"As I recall, we left it on a streetcar," said Morton. "With a transfer in its hand. That seemed hilarious at the time."

"I can't imagine Gunnison being at all like that."

"He's become somewhat of a prick over the last twenty years," said Morton sadly. "For some reason he takes all this seriously."

"What do you suppose makes a man go crazy and devote his whole life to making people buy a certain brand of clothes?"

Morton shrugged. "I don't know, Harry. Honest to God, I see these people around me talking about making everybody conscious of Stylewise clothes, worrying about it, getting ulcers over it, and I think it's me that's crazy." He took a long drag on his cigarette. "I'm just a retired drunk, myself. I don't understand their game."

"If I had to go your way or Gunnison's, I think I'd rather be a career drunk," said Harry. "At least you stay human."

An involuntary grimace came over Morton. "Don't try it. Liquor's no friend—not really. Oh sure, I remember a lot of wild times and funny moments, and that's what I talk about. And I'll admit it, I still think about getting drunk, wish I could do it again—but it's no good, Harry. The remorse. Jesus Christ, the remorse! Sick as a dog lots of times, retching, and hating myself . . ." His voice trailed off, his mouth bent as by a sour taste.

Harry stood up, stretching. "You're no damn good, Mort. Why don't you jump out the window?"

Morton glanced up quickly at Harry, then gave a sheepish grin. "I would, but I'm scared of heights. You free for lunch?"

"Sure. I'll need your company after Gunnison gets through with me."

Wade Linden was coming down the hall from the executive john, and his appearance made Harry feel shabby. Wade used his store discount to keep himself dressed in excellent, conservative taste. He had casually hinted to Harry that a little of his store salary might go toward a new wardrobe, but Harry clung stubbornly to his three-year-old suit and banked his check. He'd need that money while he was finding the right teaching job.

"Gunnison just sent word he's ready for us," said Wade.

"How's his mood?"

"Not so hot. He's been chewing out Barth because the south windows didn't get changed yesterday. Those sweater and topcoat ads ran this morning, and the merchandise didn't get in the windows. Storm warnings are up."

Old E.B. was leaning forward in his swivel chair, the morning papers spread out before him, his brick-red face set in a bitter scowl. Without glancing up to acknowledge the presence of Linden and Harry, he snarled, "Those ignorant sonsabitches, you'd think they didn't know what keeps them in business. We ran an ad for golf sticks and they put it in the middle of the race results! If we ran an ad for jock straps, they'd probably put it on the society page!" Then he glared at Harry and Linden as though daring them to contradict him. It was hard to imagine this man, young and cheerfully gassed, smuggling a mannequin onto a streetcar. What had happened to him? Somewhere along the line success had murdered that young man and utterly disposed of the body.

There was a long pause, for Linden had taught Harry to play a defensive game with E.B., letting him lead. Gunnison leaned slowly back in his swivel chair, which squeaked with his weight.

"Well," he said finally, "are we going to have a Carnival next Monday or not?"

"We are," said Wade. "You've seen all the announcement ads."

"I've seen the mess you're making of the store, too. Every gahdam place I look they're carrying out merchandise cases and putting up vaudeville stages or barbecue pits or swimming pools or some other frigging thing! You think we're in the entertainment business? How can we sell anything if the customers can't find it?"

"We're trying to get people into the store," said Wade. "We can't generate traffic without the stunts and giveaways. If people have a good time, they'll buy and they'll come back—"

"Never mind the bullshit!" cut in Gunnison. "How's your budget?"

"We're inside it," said Wade. "I can show you an itemized breakdown if you like."

"Just tell me one thing. How much is that big gahdam swimming pool in the sports department costing us?" When Wade started to answer, Gunnison waved him into silence with the metal ruler, then

pointed it at Harry. "You. Who are you? Charlie McCarthy? Can't you talk?"

"That swimming pool is the trout tank," said Harry. "It's free, for the plugs we give the manufacturer in our ads. We'll spend about two hundred dollars for the week's supply of trout." He was thankful to be on solid ground with this question.

"That," said Gunnison slowly, "is the most hare-brained gahdam scheme I have ever heard of, and I don't know why I ever let you talk me into it. It just better pay off, that's all. There better be crowds in that sports department all day every day, or I will personally stuff those fish up your gigi."

Harry felt a lost, sinking emptiness that was abruptly filled by a rush of hot anger. His mouth opened, but he caught the warning glance from Wade. Gunnison was looking up at him from under heavy black eyebrows, the hint of a smile around the tight mouth. Harry tried not to squirm under the needle. Blessed are the meek, they shall inherit. But oh let me catch this bastard on a dark night, and I'll gladly forfeit my share of the estate.

Wade was talking again, laying out lists of entertainers, clothing models, sports celebrities, and so forth. Gunnison was cleaning his eyeteeth with his tongue, saying nothing. Finally he waved the ruler again, and Linden was through.

"Okay, okay," said Gunnison. "Just see that it all happens the way it's supposed to happen. I shouldn't have to tell you that Sherwood Murvyn and the whole board of directors will be prowling around the store every day, and they better like what they see."

"They will," said Wade, with the cheerful confidence Harry envied. He gave Harry the nod that said it was over.

As Harry stood, Gunnison pinned him with a stare. "You," he said. "How come you're always gabbing with old Morton?"

"I like him."

Gunnison was openly suspicious of such a simple answer. He let his stare wander slowly down from Harry's necktie to his shoes and back up again, not liking any of it.

"Two of a kind," he said.

20

The campus was beautiful in its relative emptiness Saturday morning. Hardly a dozen students were visible across the rolling sweep of lawn between the Engineering and Liberal Arts buildings. The sky was bright blue, and the breeze had the freshness of the ocean in it. I'm going to make it, thought Harry, as he walked to his waiting class of native illiterates. I'm going to get through it. I'm going to survive the Carnival and the credential and live happily ever after, beloved by my pupils and respected by my colleagues. I have a hundred dollars in the bank, my students are improving, and today after class I will review *The Faerie Queene* and *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* so as to astound my examiners with my erudition. God's in his Heaven, and all's—

And there he was. The eminent Dr. Willhunt himself, materialized from behind a stone drinking fountain, where he was no doubt practicing some act of darkness. He confronted Harry, bouncing a bit on the balls of his feet.

"You seem to have been assiduously avoiding me lately," said Dr. Willhunt in honeyed tones. "I've missed you in class."

"Press of business," said Harry, forcing a stiff grin. "End of term pressures. My own students to prepare for finals, you know."

"I know very well indeed." Dr. Willhunt raised one eyebrow slightly and lowered the other, giving him what he considered a look both wise and menacing. "I no longer see any reason for polite pre-

tence with you, Harry. Not after that despicable little trick of yours in the Dean's office."

"To err is human. To forgive . . ."

Willhunt's nostrils thinned. "Don't try that on me. I'm warning you. Make one little mistake and I'll get you. You'd better write a perfect final, and you'd better hand in a perfect report on your practice teaching. You'd better keep your nose clean in every way—because one little excuse is all I need to boot you and your morbid sense of humor right out of the Education Department."

There was a silence. Mustering a courage he did not feel, Harry finally said, "Will you level with me about one thing?"

"I'm being absolutely honest."

"Then tell me, Dr. Willhunt—are you in love with me?"

Oh, it was worth it, just to see the look on his face. The way his mouth pursed up he'll have to be fed with an eyedropper for a week. And those lovely flashing eyes with the lashes batting away.

It was only after Willhunt was fifty feet up the path and Harry had stopped laughing that he got that cold, sinking, scared sensation. Sweet Christ, where are my brains? If I'd been with Dante and met that lion in our path I'd have barked like a dog just for laughs, and where would the *Divine Comedy* be now?

They were all waiting for him, just as though it *were* a beautiful morning, with God in his Heaven and all right with the world. There was Pokrovsky, the pride of the locker room, who would never be more than half literate. "You learned me a lot already," he had told Harry, touchingly. And there was Rollins, the thyroid case, with his eyes starting from his head with nervousness. There was Miss Hinson with the frizzy hair, Miss Toscan with the faint mustache, and Miss Clinch with the nicotined teeth. Where, oh where were the lovely coeds of musical comedies, the rows and rows of gleaming smiles and bouncing boobies? Ah, there beyond the three furies was Miss Janice Rohl, the lovely maiden whom he must multiply in the mirrors of his mind to people this grisly campus where Willhunts stalked abroad in full daylight. Would she ever forgive his not liking LBJ? Was she the answer to his ailing love life? Couldn't he forget a few thousand Vietnamese for the sake of a wee bite on that alabaster neck? No doubt about it, old Lyndon was freeing the Viets of Communism, Buddhism, and old age, sure as Miss Rohl was

a thirty-six B. But imagination, that usually dependable lecher, failed to respond. Why, when Miss Rohl was truly better looking and bigger busted, why should he prefer his own Jan? Faithless bitch. But speculation ended at the sight of Nick Philbert, seated in a corner of the back row of the shallow room, a strange, almost luminous smile on his face.

"Today," said Harry, "we're going to discuss complex sentences and various types of modifying clauses."

When he put the chalk down fifty minutes later and dusted his hands with his handkerchief, he felt he had been through an ordeal. The students hadn't been bad; some of them had even shown signs of understanding the uses of the adverbial clause. But whenever Harry had glanced up, Nick had been looking at him with that odd smile, as though he were encouraging Harry through a difficult recitation. Now, as the last student filed out and Harry put away his dusty handkerchief, Nick walked up and stood gazing at him.

"Well done," said Nick, "thou good and faithful servant."

"Nice of you to drop in. What are you on?"

"Nothing. I've got no use for dope any more. I don't need it."

Oh boy. Harry looked steadily at Nick for a long moment. Something about the eyes gave him the look of a fine ceramic, that certain glaze acquired under extreme temperature.

"What is it, man—peyote?"

"Oh, thou of little faith," said Nick, with that funny smile. "Can't you understand? I've broken through. I've seen the light."

Harry raised his hand and squeezed his temples between thumb and middle finger. "I'm very happy for you," he said.

"I want to help you, Harry. I want to make you see God, just as I did. Just believe in me. I can save you."

Harry looked scared, but managed to keep his voice level. "Best offer I've had all day. Start saving."

"But first you must repent and be absolved."

"I repent daily," said Harry. "Sometimes I spend the afternoon repenting the morning. I'm all caught up in that department."

"Let's not joke about this, Harry. Wouldn't you like to kneel and pray with me, right now?"

"I'd a lot rather go someplace else and do it. I think there's a class in here this next hour." Harry was moving for the door, with Nick

close after him, quoting Scripture a mile a minute. What a sense of humor God has, to send me Nick at a time like this. What was he *saying*?

". . . I think we may as well go right to the Dean's office and get it over with. Sin concealed is sin compounded."

Harry stopped, turned. "Get what over with?"

"We have to tell him. Don't you understand that, Harry?"

"Tell him what?"

"That I took that final for you."

Harry's ears roared. Students were coming down the hall, with the three hundred pounds of Rachel Fanning ballooning their way. Nick was talking again, way too loud. "That was cheating, Harry, what we did. I don't want that on your conscience."

Rachel had slowed as she neared Harry, so she heard enough to give him a funny look.

"Hi, Rachel," he said. "How's business?"

Rachel grinned widely. "Great! We cleared over four hundred bucks last week and we're still expanding the route. You were crazy not to get in on this."

"Possibly you're right." Then, because Nick was looking like he might practice a laying-on of hands, Harry said, "Rachel, this is Nick, a friend of mine."

"Hi, Nick. I've seen you around with Harry."

"Sister," said Nick fervently, clasping her arm.

What a trophy, to save her. If just half that body was full of soul —"Come on, Nick," he said urgently, "we've got a lot of things to settle. See you later, Rachel."

"Yeah, okay," she said uncertainly.

"Peace," said Nick, giving her arm a final squeeze.

Nick's car was in the faculty parking lot, that being one of the privileges conferred by divine grace. Harry figured he'd have to take the streetcar out here to pick up his own car later, but that was a minor problem. Getting Nick off campus was worth any trouble.

Nick drove swiftly, taking full advantage of the mantle of protection God had thrown about him. At a wide three-way intersection they ducked into the parking lane to skirt the double line of backed-up traffic, darted through the red light, and swerved dizzyingly through the cross traffic. Harry had a lingering memory of brakes

yowling and a woman in a cloche hat, slammed forward over her steering wheel, eyes liked fried eggs. Then she was gone, and they were leaning hard through a series of uphill curves.

"Like, kinda fast," Harry ventured, as the car slid through a turn, nearly taking out a concrete divider.

Nick smiled benignly at him. "Are you afraid to meet God face to face?"

"It's just that I had some other things to do today."

But Nick didn't slow down. Harry lowered his head and gave himself up to meditation and prayer. Okay, God, I'm scared. Now what?

Even the homey shabbiness of his apartment failed to give Harry the comforting pang of familiarity he usually felt. Nick closed the door behind them solidly and strode across the room with great purpose, a Jacob prepared to wrestle the Angel.

"I'll fix some coffee," said Harry. "Make yourself at home."

In the kitchen he discovered he was trembling. He dropped a cup, and it shattered on the edge of the sink. Why was he so shaken up? Nutty old Nick—was this new kick really such a wild departure? He'd been high on Hegel, hot jazz, and heroin. So why not Christ? Like Nick's other salvations, this will pass. So why panic?

Because he's going to turn you in for cheating, said some selfish bastard inside.

He took the two cups of instant coffee into the front room, set one of them beside Nick, then retreated to the old overstuffed armchair for which Jan had sewn a green cover.

"How long since you've had a fix, Nick?"

That beatific smile again. "You just can't believe it, can you, Harry." He glanced at his watch. "It's been—oh, I guess about seventy-two hours. They just don't make H that lasts that long."

"No, I know you're not still on. But I just wondered—"

"You just wondered if I'll start getting a yen pretty quick and forget all about this. I won't." Then, intensely, "You don't *know* what's happened to me! You can't *understand.* You have eyes and cannot see!"

"Have you talked to your family about this?"

"My father's dead. My mother's back east somewhere, I don't

know. She's a lush." As an afterthought he said gently, "God bless her."

Harry took a sip of coffee. "Who else have you seen?"

"Nobody. At first the happiness was almost too much. I didn't want to talk to anybody. I just walked around the park for a whole day. Then I decided to come and see you, because you're my best friend, and I knew you'd be glad for me."

I'm his best friend. No wonder he needs God.

"And I knew I could help you, Harry. Listen, we've got to go in Monday and tell the Dean about me taking the Visual Aids test for you. I know that's standing in the way of your spiritual progress."

Harry's cup clattered in his saucer. "Nick, if that was the worst sin against my soul, I'd have ascended bodily into heaven by now—right through the roof."

"Well," said Nick mildly, "we'll clear that up first, then start on your other sins."

"For the love of Christ, don't rat on me to the Dean! I'll get thrown right out of school. There goes my teaching credential, my whole plan to make something intelligible out of my life!"

"You take Christ's name very casually. What do you really know about him, Harry?"

"He was a great guy, a swinger, the head cat. What he said was right, absolutely. I wish I had the guts to make it work."

"It works so easily," said Nick. "Just do it."

"I'm afraid I'll get nailed up, like they did to him."

"You misunderstand." Nick shook his head gently. "Christ died freely and willingly. He took our sins upon himself, and he died on the cross to free us of our guilt."

"Oh, bullshit. That's the most primitive superstition I ever heard. People were laying their misdeeds on a goat and killing it, thousands of years before Christ. They killed him because they couldn't stand to listen to him or have him around."

Nick was still shaking his head slowly. "Pride," he said. "The worst sin of all, and you've got a bad case. You're even proud of your mistakes and vices. You don't want me to take those away from you." The smile. "'I am come not to take away, but to fulfill.'"

Harry opened his mouth to answer but said nothing.

Abruptly Nick stood up. "I'll have to think about you, Harry. You're worse off than I thought. It may take quite a long time to help you see the light."

"I'd love to see the light, but it would help if you'd stop talking like Billy Graham."

"Billy's all right. There are a few things he doesn't fully understand, and he tends to shout to cover that up, but he's trying to bring in the lost sheep."

"Listen, if you think it will take a while to save me, how about postponing this business of ratting to the Dean?"

"That's one of the things I'll have to think about." Nick was moving toward the door. Harry stood, glad to see him leaving, but afraid to let him go.

"Nick, old buddy—have you considered the possibility that instead of a divine revelation you might be having delusions? I mean, this is a pretty sudden change that's come over you."

"I've been studying the Bible for weeks. Every time I shot up or turned on I'd read the New Testament."

"I doubt if the clergy will consider that adequate preparation to announce yourself as the risen Christ."

Nick smiled with utter certainty. "What do you think I was doing when I disappeared into the wilderness the first time around?"

21

The woman behind the reception counter had a long, horsy face set off by square glasses with wide black rims. The office was very restful, a large amount of natural wood tones with touches of green and a long planter with real plants. It seemed to take a long time to get from the front door across to that reception counter with the lady waiting, already eyeing them in that measuring sort of way. She made Harry wonder suddenly about his appearance—and the appearance of Jake Summers beside him.

While he was introducing them both to the horsy lady, his mind went on reconsidering the wisdom of bringing Jake into this. Jake was, after all, a friend of Nick's, had played with him in small jazz groups, and saw him as frequently as Harry. But was Jake really the right man to help bring stability into any situation?

"Just what seems to be the trouble?" asked the horsy lady, a Mrs. Thorwald.

"We know a cat who's wigged out," said Jake.

Her eyes flicked to Harry, who quickly said, "A friend of ours is showing strong symptoms of mental disturbance."

"You know," said Jake, "he's flipped." He made a tight circular wiggle of his index finger at his temple.

"Just what did you wish to do?" Mrs. Thorwald asked Harry.

"We want to get help for him. We don't *know* what to do."

Mrs. Thorwald rested her two large upper front teeth on the eraser of her pencil. "All of our outpatient consultations require a

six months appointment in advance now," she said meditatively.

"You gotta give six months notice to lose your wig?" asked Jake in some alarm.

She nodded sympathetically. "Our psychiatrists are simply swamped. They are booked solid every day."

Harry looked around the office, where a single middle-aged catatonic was studying his cuticles. "It doesn't look crowded today."

"This is Saturday," Mrs. Thorwald reminded him gently.

"Nuts take the weekend off and go sane!" cackled Jake.

Mrs. Thorwald was beginning to fidget whenever Jake spoke. "We have only one clinical psychologist on duty today. We try to hold our weekend appointments to emergencies only."

"This is an emergency, believe me," said Harry.

With the air of granting a tremendous concession, Mrs. Thorwald wrote their names on a small piece of paper. "I'll have you see Mrs. Bladney as soon as she's free. Please be seated.

They sat on one of the long low couches covered with smooth plastic. Jake promptly stripped a large leaf off one of the plants in the planter and began to shred it in an artistic pattern, leaving the strips of green dangling from the stem. There was nothing to read except an old issue of *Your Health*, so Harry picked it up and leafed through it. Seems there was a mysterious cholinesterase-like substance inexplicably appearing in the bloodstream of certain psychotics. How restful it would be to spend one's days in a white smock in a nice clean lab, peeking at microscope slides. Keep the madmen away from me, please, it may be contagious.

Mrs. Bladney had pale hair, a cross between blonde and gray, cut short and mannish to give her lean face a look of intellect and efficiency, but her habit of batting her eyelids rapidly at odd intervals undid the effect. She stood just inside the door to her small but comfortable office. With a crisp smile she beckoned Harry and Jake toward two contoured plastic chairs. Then, catching a look from Mrs. Thorwald, she stepped out into the hall. Their sibilant whispers did not carry past the slit of the door opening, but when Mrs. Bladney returned to the room she gave them a definitely calculating look, and she lost no time in settling into a defensive position behind her desk, hand near the call buzzer.

"Now," she said in a firm, low-pitched voice, "let's get to the root of the problem as quickly as possible, shall we?"

"We have this friend," said Harry. "Nick Philbert."

"Funny name for a nut, huh?" said Jake.

Mrs. Bladney's eyes batted rapidly, but she made herself continue looking at Jake. "Very droll," she said. "Continue."

"He thinks he's Christ," said Harry, anxious to get the worst said quickly. "He's sure of it. Positive."

"That's *Jesus* Christ," said Jake. "You remember . . ." He threw his arms wide and stretched his neck till the cords stood out, a fine imitation of the crucifixion pose.

Mrs. Bladney's eyelids fluttered again, and when she spoke, Harry noted that her voice had gone up a full tone. Looking directly at Harry, she seemed to exclude Jake from her question.

"Uh, just how long has your friend had this delusion?"

"A couple days, I guess," said Harry. "When he came to see me this morning he was spouting Bible quotations and calling on me to repent and be saved. I tried to reason with him, but he was way out of my reach. He needs professional help."

Mrs. Bladney's gaze dwelt briefly on Jake, who was waving the shredded-leaf fan in a series of small, interlocked circles. Jake, watching her from under his brows, uttered a short, goatlike grunt of laughter.

Mrs. Bladney turned back to Harry. "Do you suppose your friend would agree to a voluntary commitment?"

"Never!" said Jake quickly.

"I doubt it," Harry had to agree. "He's a strong-willed person, very convinced he's in the right."

Mrs. Bladney hesitated a moment. "Would you say he might simply be suffering from overwork, a sort of nervous exhaustion?"

"Naw," said Jake emphatically. "He's flipped."

Mrs. Bladney gathered her courage and lowered her voice to its most soothing note. "You know the subject quite well, do you, Mr. Summers?"

"Intimately."

"What would *you* say is at the root of his difficulty?"

"Those three caps of acid he swallowed."

"I beg your pardon?"

"LSD, baby. You know, the Long Swift Dive into the groovy void."

Seeing her frightened glance, Jake couldn't repress another goat-

like chuckle. What a loony old broad! Ready to jump out of her skin she was. Poor nuts that depended on her for help!

Mrs. Bladney got her eye reflex under control at last and turned back to Harry. "Is this true?"

"I didn't know," said Harry bitterly. "Nobody told me."

"It must have slipped his divine mind," said Jake. "I laid the hit on him myself. He took off and swung."

"You're the one who should be committed," she said, with a hard look at Jake. He put his finger between his lips and wiggled it up and down to make a blubbering sound.

"God damn it, Jake—cool it!" said Harry.

Jake stood up, laughing. "I'm sorry, man—I just couldn't resist putting her on, as soon as I dug the way she was looking at me—it was too much." He reached across the desk and wrung her hand before she could snatch it away. "No offense, lady. Don't take any wooden schizoids. I'll wait for you outside, Harry." He went out, giggling.

When the door had closed, Harry slowly sat down. "I apologize," he said. "For him and for myself. I didn't know LSD was involved. How does that affect the situation?"

"His psychosis may be temporary—but it's just as real and fully as dangerous. He'll be more unpredictable than a patient with the usual Messiah complex."

"Okay. He's my friend and he's crazy. What can I do?"

"Why don't you let his family handle it?"

"His father's dead. His mother is back east somewhere."

"No brothers or sisters?"

"None." Harry paused. "I get the feeling you think I'm meddling in something that's none of my business."

"Well . . ." The smile was not really warm. "Legally speaking that is the case."

"I wasn't thinking legally when I came in here. I'm worried that my friend will do something weirdo and land in jail. I don't see how a jail cell is going to improve his state of mind."

"I'm sure your motives are admirable," said Mrs. Bladney. She got a pack of cigarettes from her desk drawer, shook one out and lit it. "But we have only two courses of action open. You can either per-

suade your friend to take a voluntary commitment, or you can sign papers to have him forcibly committed."

"Suppose I sign to get Nick forcibly committed. What then?"

"You'd be taking a very great legal risk. You could have both civil and criminal action brought against you if you're wrong."

"He says he's Christ. You think he is?"

"It doesn't matter what I think. If you sign papers to have him committed, and if—at the particular moment of his examination—he can convince the examining doctor that he's sane, he will be released. Then he can sue you for everything you have, and he can quite easily win a judgment. We've seen it happen."

Harry stared out the window, seeing the sunlight slanting across a row of eucalyptus trees. God, this has been a long day, and it's far from over. I should be at home reading *Paradise Regained,* for that eminent Miltonian scholar Dr. Sachs will ask piercing questions, never for a moment caring if my friends are dragged off screaming. Am I my no-relation's keeper? But if I flipped, wouldn't I want some friend to help me? But would I want to be committed?

Aloud he said, "So your advice is to do nothing."

"That's your only safe course. If your friend proved to be sane by the time of his examination, he could also bring a criminal libel suit against you. You might end up in jail yourself."

Harry stood up. "Thanks very much for your time. I'm sorry Mr. Summers disturbed you."

Mrs. Bladney stubbed out her cigarette. "I see all sorts here. But I must say, he's something else."

He found Jake on the concrete front steps of the clinic building, drinking from an open fifth of burgundy. Jake extended the bottle to him generously, but Harry waved it away. They began to walk.

"So now what?" asked Jake.

"So nothing. She advised me to shut up and sit down. Let Nick wig all over town till they bust him or he gets smashed up."

"We wasted our time with that bitch back there. What a doll."

"She loved you, too. Said to give you her fondest."

Jake drained the bottle and threw it over a hedge. "I knew her the minute I saw her. She cures her patients, all right—by putting their nuts in a vise and twisting till they agree to go straight."

They paused by Harry's parked car. "Want me to drive you home?"

Jake shook his head. Let's walk down to the park and go to the museum. I've got a nice little joint in my pocket. We can turn on and see the pretty pictures."

Harry opened the car door. "Some other time. I've got work."

"Okay, later. It was kicks. I was kinda lonesome anyhow, I was glad you phoned."

"Where's the wife?"

"Which one?"

"The blonde with the Shirley Temple curls. Isn't she the latest?"

"Oh, her. She took off. It wasn't legal. Myra sent me a postcard from Mexico saying she was gonna divorce me, so I married whatsername. But you know how women are, they never do what they say they're gonna."

Driving back to his apartment, Harry tried to keep his mind blank, listening to the knocking of that rod in the engine. Would it hold out until he was settled as a teacher, making all that money? At home the blind Milton lay in wait with thousands of lines heavy as coiled anchor chain.

Paradise Regained by Nick Philbert. Or how to see God in three easy capsules. Friends are such a comfort.

22

But full of fire and greedy hardiment,
The youthful knight could not for ought be staide,
But forth unto the darksome hole he went,
And looked in: his glistring armor made
A little glooming light, much like a shade,
By which he saw the ugly monster plaine,
Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide,
But th' other halfe did womans shape retaine,
Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine.

Stanza 14, Book I, Canto I. In Book I, the Knight of the Red Cross (representing Holiness) is sent to rescue Una (Truth) from the Dragon (Error). And it only takes him *twelve* Cantos to do it, about forty stanzas per Canto. And don't forget, there's a political allegory beneath the moral allegory, for the Knight's Queen is Gloriana (Glory) also representing Elizabeth; Prince Arthur is Lord Leicester; Duessa (Falsehood) is Mary, Queen of Scots, etc.

Four thousand eight hundred lines later we arrive at Book II, Canto I. Spenser had planned to continue the allegory for twelve books, but a merciful God called him home after six full books and part of the seventh, some 240,000 lines, during which such ever-fascinating events as the revolt of the Spanish Netherlands, and the rising of the northern Catholic houses against Elizabeth are told in double parable, or paradiddle.

Which brings us up to the year 1599. Only three and a half more centuries to consider, only a hundred or so major literary figures, only a billion lines to read, absorb, correlate, and cross-file in the few days remaining. So let us hasten on to the sonnets of Samuel Daniel (1562–1619), known and loved for his epic poem "History of the Civil Wars." Out of print now, since the demand slacked off abruptly about 350 years ago.

The knocking in Harry's head was finally traced to the front door of his apartment. He walked down the short dark hallway through a fog of vanished centuries, lines clanging in his head, pulled the knob and found himself looking at Jan, standing frail and uncertain, regarding him with her wide child's eyes.

Still let me sleep, embracing clouds in vain,

cried the ghost of Samuel Daniel over his shoulder as he fled Harry's mind, dropping him rudely back into the cold twentieth.

"Well." He stepped back. "Come in."

She did. She was wearing the brown coat with the wide belt, the one he had never liked much. She was not the most beautiful girl in the world, that was certain, now that he could take a good look at her. Funny how he'd had that misconception lately. Her heels clicked across the hall floor. And above those heels what legs, oh, legs. There was a burning sensation at the corners of his eyes.

In the living room she turned to face him. "Are you very busy?"

He shrugged, throwing a hand at the welter of open books spilled across the painted wooden table that served him as a desk.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No." He answered too quickly, then made himself pause. "Sit down. Take off your coat."

She was wearing the yellow dress, his favorite, cut square to show her slim neck, fitted closely over her small firm breasts. And to hell with the whole Elizabethan Age.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Harry, but I wanted to talk."

"I've tried."

"I know. I apologize for hanging up on you."

He shrugged again, wishing he'd stop that. "Were you really out, all those other times I phoned?"

"Not always. I was still angry."

"Can't blame you, I guess. I really behaved like an idiot that night. . . ." he couldn't make himself say it. "The guy irritated me."

"You don't really own me, Harry."

No need to say that. No need at all. "I'll make some coffee." He turned and moved quickly to the kitchen.

"How's your job coming?" her voice drifted out to him.

"Great. Carnival's next week."

"So is your exam, isn't it?"

"That's right." He found it easier to breathe with her out of sight, so he waited in the kitchen after the water was on the burner and the instant coffee in the cups. Stupid, the way excitement kept crowding his chest. Like some dumb kid on a first date. He wished she would leave; he was afraid she would leave. Damn her anyhow. Who did she think she was, hanging up on him? Then showing up like this, unannounced. But she's here, she's here.

Easy now. That dentist had struck a nerve, all right. Harry hadn't known she could hurt him that much, and he wasn't going to let himself in for that again, not if he could help it. Not while he had so many other things to worry about twenty-five hours a day. Be cold, dignified; show her. Water's boiling. Stop shaking, you clown, you'll scald yourself.

He carried the cups into the living room, set one beside her, then retreated to the far chair.

"I'm sorry to break in when you're so busy."

"Yeah, you said that." He wished he could be civil, but he didn't feel he could afford it.

"Things seem to be going all wrong between us." She had never been a great talker, and each sentence seemed squeezed out of her. He had to give her credit, though he couldn't let on. How could he say his jealousy was so large it frightened him? May as well come right out and say he loved her, and of course that was not true. Because some enchanted evening, across a crowded room . . .

"Do you think it's my fault?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, but her tone said yes, plenty of it was his fault.

"I haven't been busy with some apprentice tooth-grinder."

"Oh, him."

Why should his rib cage jump around like that? *Oh, him*—two

such beautiful words, said in that offhand tone of dismissal. Now that, by God, was really poetry. Take note, Samuel Damiel, or whatever your name is. He leaned forward and spoke warmly. "Look, Jan, I know the last few months have been bad. But I've been swamped. I took on a real load, and I can't drop anything. Another week and it's over, I'll be in the clear."

"Then what?"

That girl. She really had a knack. Yeah, then what? The future was always so far off when the days were crowded. There was just that vague happy time when he'd be Mr. Chips, in the chips, beloved by students and bank managers alike, director of the school play, greeted on the street by solid businessmen of the thriving little community, guest editorialist of the local newspaper.

"What do you mean?" he said carefully.

She looked into her cup, where the coffee was untasted. "After the job is over and you get your degree, then do you plan to put me back on as your girlfriend two nights a week?"

"I never thought of it that way."

"Did you think of it at all?"

"I've thought about you, plenty. But I haven't tried to make any definite plans. It's all I can do to get through each day as it comes along." He waited, but she said nothing. "I've hoped—that when I get straightened out, things can be the same between us again."

"The *same*." She said the word meditatively, turning it over, considering it as though it were an immensely complex idea.

Of course nothing stays the same, and he knew it. He stared at the table of open books, where among the welter of small voices the heavy blue volume of Shakespeare raved at the cracked ceiling. Me and Hamlet are the cautious type, we like to think it over.

She stood up, setting her untouched coffee on the chair arm. She reached for her coat. Without thinking, he came out of his chair, took three quick steps across to her, and found himself also clutching the coat. For a second it looked like a tug of war developing, but with perfect instinct she simply let go and turned her back for him to put the coat around her shoulders. He dropped the coat over the chair, took her upper arms tightly in both hands, and kissed her on the side of her slim neck. Her hair tickled his cheek. How wonderful

she smelled, not like soap or perfume or summer skies or any of the absurd things in ads or poems, but just like her.

For so long it frightened him she held herself motionless and stiff in his grip, seeming to endure his repeated kisses and nibblings patiently, as the price for getting her coat on. Stung, he ran his tongue quickly around inside her ear, for he had discovered that in spite of the best predictions of the learned sex counselors this irritated rather than excited her. She quickly pulled her head away, twisting so it was easy for him to turn her full around and pull her against him. Her mouth came up to his, but her lips remained stubbornly closed.

Feeling her iron resistance, he gave up and stopped thinking of moves to excite her, let himself get lost in the sweet sad pleasure of kissing her good-bye. Even such a chaste kiss as this was pure delight now that it was a whole experience in itself, not a step down the road. He could feel the small bones of her back under his hands, the moist warmth of her breath against his cheek, the lips firm but soft, now slowly opening, opening. Tongues twining.

Knock, knock, knock! Damned be all doors, let's live in cocoons like caterpillars. And no phones to ring, either. Show me a man who can afford not to have a phone, and I'll show you a rich man.

At last she drew her head back far enough to ask with her eyes about the knocking, though she made no effort to break loose from his arms.

His taut whisper: "Never mind. Forget it."

Her whisper, barely audible: "Is it locked?"

He let go of her, willing her with all his might not to move a muscle until he came back, then stepped quickly to the edge of the faded maroon rug. The bare hall floor was trickier. Have to watch that squeaky spot. Bam, bam, bam! Suddenly he knew it was Nick, alias J.C., standing out there whamming away with divine fervor. Knock and it shall be closed unto you. Here comes a man passing out salvation but none for me thanks I've a warm girl waiting and a heaven in the hand is worth any number in the bush. Easy does it now. Hand stretching, reaching for the lock lever. Will it make a loud click as it slides home? He'd hate that, he really didn't want Nick to be hurt, to know that doors were locked against him. Easy. There it goes. How phallic, the rigid bar sliding home into the just-

fitting hollow. And not a second too soon, either, for there's the knob turning noisily, slick-slack, slick-slack. Then the silence of held breath, the long moment before the defeated footsteps turn and start down the hallway toward what mad trouble. Dear God keep him from disaster tonight. Down, conscience! He's none of my responsibility. They told me that very clearly at the skull shrinker station.

When he returned to the living room, she was seated on the edge of the wide studio couch, her hands folded quietly in her lap. He sat beside her, turned her away from him just enough to begin gently massaging her back, working down from the thin shoulder blades to the small hollow at the end of her spine, just above the beginning crease of her firm fanny.

When the yellow dress was unbuttoned down the back, his hand reached around her narrow waist under the cloth, slid beneath the elastic of her panties and discovered, with an electric tingle, the triangle of stiff fur hidden at the vortex of the universe.

The phone rang.

Life, you have no dramatic sense! No taste, no delicacy, no narrative pace! Events come all heaped up, great lumps of happening in the thin soup of everyday dullness; too little or too much always, never the right balance of tension and release. *Ringing.* He fell back on the couch, pulling her over with him, his arm still around her inside her dress. With his free hand he stretched for the phone on the low bench beside them. He handed it to her.

"Hello?" She put a hand over the mouthpiece. "A girl."

"I'm not in. Gone to China."

"No, I'm sorry, he's not here right now." She looked hard at Harry while she listened. "Who's calling?"

She put her hand over the mouthpiece again, frowning. "It's someone named Jan. Do you keep a whole stable of us?"

"Ask her what she wants."

"You'd better talk to her."

He could feel the frost forming as she held out the phone to him. "Please, ask her what she wants."

"What do you want? I mean, is there any message for him?"

She listened, and the tight line around her mouth softened. She

was trying not to smile. "All right, I'll have him call you." She handed the phone to Harry, who dropped it back on the cradle.

"Am I innocent or guilty?"

"She didn't understand something or other about the last essay assignment you gave the class." Giggling, she fell on him and buried her face against his neck. She gave him a brief bite, then rared back to look him in the eye again. "Is she pretty?"

"Not nearly as pretty as you."

There's something heartwarming about a skirt pulled up around a slim waist, especially a yellow skirt with clinging legs smooth and strong pulling him against her ridged pelvic hills, *haunchebones* said good old Chaucer, toward the source of all art.

He knew it was a temporary solution, but it was a fine one, a glorious one, and he thrust to overtake it with all his heart.

23

At eight-forty Monday morning Harry carefully laid out the last essay assignment of the semester for his foreign students, then delighted them with an early dismissal. He figured he could, if he drove like a madman, be downtown by the time the store opened. But the sight of Mr. Garcia's dark, heavy face moving toward the door reminded Harry of a chore undone. Damn. But there was no putting it off. Time was running out.

"Mr. Garcia, would you come to the desk for a moment?"

Garcia turned, dark brows pulling together. For an instant Harry thought he might ignore the request and go on out the door, but instead Garcia turned his lumbering body like a truck and shambled up to the desk, kicking aside a chair on the way.

"Sí?"

"That was a very interesting term paper you handed in."

A broad, thick-lipped grin. "You like?"

The other students were out the door. They had the room to themselves. Harry felt that odd hollowness which pervades the empty classroom. Glancing at Garcia's neck and shoulders, Harry thought of the buffalo, noble beast. Noble, but not bright.

"How much did you pay for it?"

"Qué?"

"I said how much did you pay for it?"

Stubbornly: "No comprendo."

"Usted comprendez muy bien. And since my Spanish is as lousy as

your English, let's keep it in the language you're supposed to be learning. You know what I'm talking about. You bought that term paper."

"I write it myself."

"Who is Marcel Proust?"

A silence, with Garcia scowling to cover his growing alarm.

"Who is André Malraux?"

A mighty buffalo shrug. Garcia can be seen settling into the movie-learned role of the tough guy who will wear out the rubber hoses of the whole dirty police department before he breathes a word.

"Look, Francisco," said Harry gently. Francisco, that always struck him as strange. The gentle Saint Francis with his birds. Would any feathered creature perch on Garcia? An owl, perhaps. "Look, there's no use pretending you wrote the paper when you don't even know the authors it discusses."

"I forget now."

"The least he could have done was sell you something more in your line—something on Cervantes, maybe. You like *Don Quixote*?"

"I don' know him."

"My guess is that you paid five dollars. That's the standard price for term papers in English A. More than that, you should ask for your money back." Harry could tell from the pained look on Garcia's face that he had paid more.

"You think I too dumb to write this paper?" Now he was going to try belligerence.

"I think you're as smart as the man who wrote it. But you haven't had his reading experience or his writing experience. You couldn't have learned quite that much from me in one semester. I can't give you a grade for this because you simply didn't write it."

"Boolsheet." For once Garcia was certain he had the right word.

"All right, if you insist. Wednesday morning you can read your paper aloud to the class and defend it during the discussion."

Garcia glared at Harry. "Ohright, you bastard. Go ahead, flunk me." He started to turn away.

"What good will that do either of us?"

Garcia turned back. He studied Harry through slitted eyes. You just never knew what these crazy goddam gringos were up to. "I got no sister," he said insolently.

"I don't want your sister, I just want you to write the term paper you were assigned and hand it in by Friday."

"*Then* you flunk me, huh?" After all that torture, Madre de Dios!

"Maybe. It depends on what you write. Your English is still very poor, but you've shown some progress during the term. If you write a passable term paper, you'll get a C. If you write nothing, you'll be right back here in this room at eight A.M. next semester."

"You gonna report me for cheating?"

"Why should I? I don't want you expelled, I want you to learn something."

"But I swear at you."

"Well, then, piss on you. That makes us even. Now write the paper."

Garcia stood wrestling with the difficult concept that this teacher might be human, might deserve a thanks. Or else a smash on the jaw for that insult. But Harry was already away from the desk and moving quickly for the door. "I got a sister," said Garcia loudly, "but she wouldn't let you smell her armpits!"

It was nine-sixteen by the time he got to the store and nine-twenty by the time he raced up the back stairs and got to his cubicle in the advertising offices. And there was Linden, waiting.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Arranging with a Mexican to smell his sister's armpits."

"Way you're panting, it must have been great."

"Goddam automatic elevators never get here. I ran up." Harry sucked in a great lungful of air smelling of yesterday's cigarets and inky ad proofs. "Where's Count Dracula?"

"Down in the sports department, whipping the trout pool into a froth. He'd caught about a dozen by the time the store opened. Lucky for you. Jesus, Harry—of all the mornings to be late!"

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

"Sometimes it almost seems to me the store isn't getting your complete and undivided attention."

Harry looked at Linden and found Linden's cool, steady gaze on him. Another new suit, too, a sharkskin of deep blue-black. How handy it would be to have a shark skin.

"Sometimes," said Linden, "it almost seems as though you might be carrying a full college load while you work here."

"It does seem that way, on certain days. How'd you find out?"

"It was difficult. I had to make a phone call."

"I meant to tell you when you first offered me the job, but—" Harry paused, shrugged. "Haven't I done the work?"

"You've done fine. But it occurred to me you might think you were playing me for a sucker, and I don't buy that."

"No, I—"

"If you fall on your ass, I've got to either pick you up or go down with you, and I think I'm entitled to know what's going on. This may be just moonlighting to you, but I'm—"

Footsteps pounding down the hall and across the office, deserted now, with the staff all watching the Carnival opening out on the floor. Then Grady Woods stood puffing before them, grim satisfaction mixed with his panic as he shouted: "The Tahitian Luau is on fire! The whole damn sportswear department is going up in smoke!"

Harry's arm hurt where he had collided with Linden as they went through the office door at the same instant, but the arm worked as he yanked open the heavy fire-door with it, so it must not be broken. Then he and Linden were clanging together down the steel treads of the emergency back stairway, the one Harry had so recently run up. Then out onto the third floor, into the inferno.

The fire, like so many fires, had grown fierce in the telling. There were flames, all right, and the smell of singed meat, but the early customers were standing around curiously with sale goods in their hands, waiting no doubt to see whether they need bother to stop at the cash register on their way out. The department manager, Dilworthy, was hopping around in his white puffball hat, fanning the slowly expanding fire with his funny-sayings apron and swearing with grim monotony, not so much at the fire as at his own idiocy in letting himself be roped into this. He saw a twenty-four year career in sportswear being reduced to ashes all because of his stupid pride in his talents as a backyard barbecue chef.

Harry looked for a fire extinguisher and found it, in Linden's hand. Must have grabbed it off a rack on the way down, thought Harry with a flash of admiration. He hurried down an empty aisle to the front windows and worked his way clear across, propping them open on the rachet holders. By the time he got back to the luau pit the flames were gone and Linden was letting the extinguisher fizz

out in a plastic garbage can originally meant for bones. Dilworthy was still chanting his quiet profanity, seemingly unaware the emergency was past. Over the makeshift rock pit charred lumps dripped foam which sizzled as it struck the coals.

"—miserable chickenshit lowdown sonsabitchin—" said Delworthy.

"Did you call the fire department?" snapped Linden at him.

Dilworthy looked up, silent abruptly as though a switch had been turned off. Mute and embarrassed, he shook his head.

"Good," said Linden, "get on the pipe to the ad office and be damn sure Grady didn't call them either. Or if he did, have him meet them at the curb and apologize for a false alarm. Move!"

Dilworthy moved. Linden took the empty extinguisher out of the garbage can, then raked the mess from the grills into the sea of foam. "Where'd the meat come from?"

"Save-More Markets," said Harry. "They donated it for space in the newspaper ads and that lovely big smoke-stained sign behind you. Want me to hit them for a fresh supply?"

"Tell them to hustle it over here quick if they don't want people to think they're selling charcoal spare ribs. Check the printer for a new sign, and get a couple of stock boys to clean up this mess. We'll have a God damn luau here yet!"

Harry was just hanging up the phone after his taxing conversation with the Save-More meat manager when he felt the hot breath of the dragon on his neck. He turned to find E. B. Gunnison showing a new shade of mauve and stretching his tab collar with his neck sinews. Definitely a case for the cheerful approach.

"Hi. How's fishing?"

"Rotten! Where the hell are the models you were supposed to get? Martha spent half the night picking merchandise to show and there it lays in the stockroom! Where are they?"

"I don't know. I'll phone the school right away. They promised to have six girls over here this morning." Harry grabbed the phone book and leafed through it for the number.

"What modeling school?" growled Gunnison suspiciously.

"Dream Girl. Here, I've got the number." Reaching for the phone.

"You dumb bastard! Don't you ever read the papers?"

"Been a little busy lately," admitted Harry.

"A little busy," mocked Gunnison. "You pea-brained numbskull, don't you know the cops folded them up last Saturday for running a whorehouse on the side!"

Harry let the phone back into the cradle. "No wonder they were willing to show off the girls for nothing."

"I see now how you and Linden stayed inside the budget. Every damn thing in this Carnival is some kind of graft or payola. You probably drank the whole damn budget!" Gunnison grimaced with sour satisfaction. "Well, I'd just like to know where you're going to come up with six fashion models at ten bucks an hour for the next five days. Because, junior, you're going to come up with them, or by Christ I'll have you and Linden and Grady parading around the store in drag! You'll look sweet in that sheer bouffant cocktail dress!"

Alone with his thoughts, Harry stared out the window, down into the endless movement of Market Street. The glass was filmed, rain-specked, with an artistic dollop of pigeon-crap drooping toward one corner, nature's vivid exclamation mark at the scene below. But he couldn't afford this ten-second interval of philosophy, no time now to correlate Man and the Universe, not with fashions growing stale on the stockroom table. Let's see, six girls at ten an hour, say six hours a day—sweet Jesus, that's three-sixty a day, or eighteen hundred for the week. Ouch. That will never never do.

But, on the other hand, there are girls who model for two dollars an hour. And in another second he was dialing Byron's number.

"Yeah?"

"Byron? Harry. Listen, man, I need some models, can you help? I mean, can you round up some from the art school?"

"Sure. What kind—bare-ass or costume?"

"Well . . . actually what I need are fashion models."

He could hear Byron sucking on his pipe, thinking that one over.

"I guess these chicks could wear clothes."

"Sure, why not? They might even like it. Can you get me five? But no dogs, huh. And we need them downtown by noon today. There's a fashion show then, and they parade around the store the rest of the day, passing out little goodies to the customers. Okay?"

It was settled that Byron would personally deliver the girls by eleven-thirty. Five girls at two an hour, five hours, only fifty bucks. Not bad if they didn't have stringy hair and walk like elephants.

Nothing to do but hope for the best right now and get busy putting the bite on some other modeling school that hadn't been raided yet. Have to start on that chore this afternoon.

Harry phoned Ed Fox to be sure the sports celebrities were ready for their personal appearance. Then he wandered down to the mezzanine to look over the house. The PA system was blaring out merry-go-round music, and the colored crepe-paper streamers rigged up by display gave the store a festive atmosphere. Down on the main floor the aisles were jammed. Mothers trailed kids who trailed free balloons they had been given at the doors. The music boomed to a halt with three great thumps on the mechanical drum; then Harry's own voice startled him by pouring out of the speakers with a pre-taped special announcement of a hot sale item in the housewares department. Funny how flat and awful your voice sounded from the outside. Fleeing that parody of his own richly pleasing tones, he ducked into the automatic elevator and headed for the sports department in the basement.

The sports department was split into upper and lower levels, and from the iron-railed upper level Harry looked down on what seemed at first glance a reenactment of the Titanic disaster. The lower level was one big heaving sea of faces, water, and fish. City-bound anglers crowded eight deep around the plastic pool, waiting their turn at the fly rods, while the fish, for their part, were cooperating fully, practically leaping into the pockets of the customers. The confusion was too great to tell if anyone was actually buying any merchandise, but there was no doubt they had generated traffic in the department. Not even Gunnison could bitch about this part of the operation.

There were ad proofs to correct for tomorrow's papers, a phone call to check that the meat had arrived and the sportswear customers were luauing, a new tape to fit into the PA system, a mike and some props to set up for Ed Fox on the main floor stage. Then Harry went on the run to meet Byron and his girls. They had already been shepherded into the stockroom by the fashions buyer, and the girls were in various states of undress, holding up items to see what would fit whom. Byron sat straddle of a wooden chair, looking bored. Harry was glad to see that he had shed his usual sweatshirt and sneakers for the occasion. Byron wore a pair of slacks that were

eminently decent, if a bit wide at the cuff, and a good wool tweed sportcoat that needed only a few pounds of padding out of the shoulders.

"Hi, man. Sorry I'm late. Too many details."

"No sweat," said Byron. "I got the skinniest ones I could find at the school. But that one over there's got a fat can, I notice."

"That's okay. We'll put her in the coat. It's full cut, nobody'll know the difference. Listen, I really appreciate this. I was in a bind."

"My pleasure. We can use the bread. You don't mind using Lisa, do you? Her boobs are kinda big for fashion work, but her ass is good and she knows how to walk."

Byron's wife Lisa strolled over to them, holding a pink knit dress in front of her by the shoulders. She wore a bra and panties. Byron was right, Harry noticed.

"Okay if I wear this?" she asked.

"Fine with me," said Harry. "I thought the buyer was going to stick around and decide these things."

Lisa shrugged, lowered the dress, and bent her left arm behind her to scratch beneath her strap. "She just shoved us in here and bugged out again, y'know, like, she had some kind of flea in her crotch. One of her salesgirls is having hot flashes and the floor is crawling with customers and the old doll is scared she'll blow a sale."

"Have you done any fashion modeling before?" asked Harry, hoping.

"I went to some school for a week, y'know, before I started painting. *Charm* school. Like, wow. The head cat came on real strong, y'know, but like, what he really wanted was to pimp for me. I told him sorry, it would cut into my own trade too much."

Byron struck a wooden match and lit his pipe, gazing with quiet pride at Lisa over the flame. She finished scratching then ran her finger briefly around the pantie top to untwist the elastic. Charm school, thought Harry. He said: "Lisa, maybe you can sort of take charge until the buyer gets off the floor. See that these chicks get into something that fits, show them how to walk, and tell them what's gonna happen." He reached into his coat pocket and came out with a mimeographed sheet. "Here's a schedule. The fashion

parade is out there in the department, the way you came in. The buyer will do all the talking, introduce the dresses and so on. Then after the show you'll pick up the sample stuff to hand out this afternoon. Just circulate around the store. Get yourself seen. You'll have number tags on the clothes. Anybody wants to know about them, just tell them the number and ask any salesgirl."

"What kind of samples are we passing out?" A brief flick of the pelvis.

"Cosmetic stuff, mostly. Little bars of soap, face powder, jazz like that."

"Mind if we grab some of it?"

"Take what you want. Just save some for the customers." Harry turned to Byron. "Sorry, man, but I've got a few other panics to handle. You gonna stick around?"

"For a while." Byron sucked his pipe and looked at Harry with mild curiosity. "How'd you fall into this gig, man?"

"Old school friend."

"You sell out?"

"Just renting."

"Nutty."

"Later."

On the main selling floor the crowd was already pressing in around the wooden stage where Ed Fox stood quietly chatting with a lean, six-foot towhead and a smiling, sharply-dressed Negro, two members of the local baseball team. Not being a fan, Harry didn't recognize either of them, but apparently there were plenty who did. Over against the far wall Linden could be seen up on a counter, rigging up the canvas target the lanky pitcher was to throw at. This bit of action had been Fox's idea, and a good one. Harry was edging his way through the crowd to help Linden when a hand clutched his arm and an urgent voice said, "Qvick, come! Down in za basement! You are vanted!"

It was Danzig from the camping and hunting counter, a stocky bush-haired figure whose mannerisms and accent were the source of many store anecdotes. Harry glanced back once, reassuring himself that Fox was set to begin his interview show. Then he let Danzig half-drag him through the aisles toward the back stairway.

"What is it? What's the matter now?"

"Come, I show. Gunnison says you come qvick."

They rattled down the steel stairs into the concrete tunnel leading to the furnace room and the freight unloading section. At the turn that led off into the sports department stockroom they met Gunnison coming toward them. In this gloomy cavern, half lighted by a bare bulb in a wire cage, he might have been the Minotaur himself. His glaring eyes were yellow, red-rimmed.

"Some old jerk had himself a heart attack," growled Gunnison at Harry, leaving no doubt this was entirely Harry's fault. "I laid him out in the tunnel by the stockroom. Get down there."

"Is he still alive?"

"Breathing." Gunnison turned on Danzig. "Why the hell are you standing here looking constipated? Your goddam counter is loaded with customers. Even a dumb squarehead like you oughta be able to sell something today!"

Danzig's face tightened, but he swallowed his answer, turned and waddled off quickly toward his department. Gunnison started to move off the opposite way, toward the stairs.

"How about a doctor?" called Harry.

"I'll phone," said Gunnison. "You stay with him. You can take him up the freight elevator to keep him out of sight." Gunnison's heavy footsteps rang on the steel treads, cutting off the chance of a reply.

The man was not really old, Harry found as he knelt beside him. About the age Harry's father would have been, if he were alive. Neatly dressed in a dark suit, now showing the marks of the dusty concrete floor. Glasses rather askew. Harry took them off gently, folded them and slipped them into the inside jacket pocket. The man's expression did not alter, nor did his shallow breathing. There was a slight ridge across the brow above the eyes, a faint frown it seemed, surprise as much as pain. The hands which lay limply beside him were white, oddly younger than the weathered face. Harry lifted one of the pale hands off the cold concrete and felt a sudden shock as the hand tightened on his. He resisted the urge to pull free, lowered himself onto his hams and gave an answering pressure to the fingers, now still and cool, wrapped around his own. "Can you hear me?" he asked quietly. There was no answer. "Don't worry, you'll be all right. I'll stay here with you. The doctor's on his way." There was no sign the man had heard.

Somewhere around the corner of the tunnel the door to the sports department was opened and left ajar, so now the babble of the crowd around the trout tank, the scuff of feet, and the occasional yell as a fish was yanked from the water all drifted through, echoing hollowly along the concrete vault. The floor under his legs was cold and he was getting a cramp in his foot, but Harry didn't move. How weird, this being imprisoned underground with the cold silent man nobody knew, who said nothing, while around and above him hundreds of people watched new fashions, applauded baseball stars, even caught fish. Harry had suddenly stepped on a thinly iced-over crevice, had broken through, and gone plunging down into one of the unfathomable cracks in life, those shafts which open so unexpectedly in the solid ground of daily living. Every second he drew further away from lean lefties who threw baseballs for forty thousand a year, from pale girls who sat motionless for two dollars an hour, from insolent young clerks selling neckties, from worried buyers sucking gastric alkalizers, from office slaves crowding the trout tank and dreaming of the great north woods, from the mothers and their balloon-trailing children. The store and everyone in it was receding, moving away, down this gloomy concrete cave with its caged lights, leaving only Harry and the nameless dying man alone in the labyrinth.

A soft sound made Harry yank his head around and up. Behind him a stockboy stood casually combing his voluminous dark hair into a ducktail. In his flat stare there was nothing but curiosity.

"S'matter with 'im?"

"I don't know. Heart attack, or maybe a stroke."

"Tough shit."

Harry clenched his jaw on the answer. How could you lock up a young man in these tombs and still expect him to be human?

"Listen," said Harry in as normal a tone as he could manage. "Get me one of those foam mattresses from camping stock, will you?"

"What for?"

"To put under this man." He had another idea. "And while you're at it, get one of those little oxygen kits from the skin-diving rack."

"What's the use? He's dyin', ain't he?"

"So are you," said Harry. "From the brain downward. Now get me

that mattress and oxygen kit or, God damn you, I'll kick your ass all over the stockroom!"

The boy left, as slowly as he dared. Harry sat gloomily, seeing for the moment little difference between himself and Gunnison. The world was run on vulgar threats of violence or humiliation. He gave the cool hand in his a slight pressure of encouragement, but there was no answering squeeze. Was it rigor mortis that gripped his fingers now? Did death have hold of him? He slid his free hand up the wrist, which seemed strangely large and bony. The pulse was there, faint and rapid, life stuttering weakly through the veins.

The stockboy returned, foam mattress under one arm, the small oxygen bottle and plastic mask in his other hand. Harry gently disengaged his hand, rolled the silent man half over, slid the mattress beneath him, and rolled him back onto it.

"I ain't gonna take the blame for that dirty mattress."

"Just shut up and get out of here."

The stockboy sauntered off, again combing his hair, preparing to dazzle the world with his beauty. Harry broke the seal on the bottle, turned the valve until he could hear a faint hissing, then set the plastic cup over the man's nose and mouth. In a moment he drew a deeper, slightly shuddering breath and his lips twitched. Harry took the cup off for a moment. He wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing medically or not, but it seemed reasonable. The man's lips moved again, and Harry leaned close to hear.

"Elsa." No more than a faint whisper. Nothing followed.

In a moment Harry replaced the oxygen cup over the immobile face. Elsa. It was an old-fashioned name, not one you heard much anymore. Harry felt a pang for her, whoever she was, wherever she might be. This would be a bad day for her, one long remembered.

Footsteps, brisk ones this time from down the tunnel. Then an efficient, compact little man in his forties was kneeling beside Harry, putting his hand flat on the chest of the victim.

"Has he said anything?" He had a small mustache which jumped when he talked.

"Just Elsa. Maybe his wife's name," said Harry.

The little man felt with practiced swiftness over the invalid's pockets, coming up with a worn billfold which divulged several

cards and a driver's license. Before Harry could read the name, the other had sprung open his bag and was writing on a printed form with rapid strokes. "You want to make any statement?" he shot at Harry.

"Statement? What for? Why the hell don't you do something for him?" said Harry, his anger growing.

"You got me wrong, fella. I'm not the doctor. I represent the insurance company. Gunnison just phoned me and told me to hustle over here. We want to be damn sure we're not liable in this case. He didn't have a fall, did he? Those cases are always rough to defend. You feel his head for bumps?"

"No," said Harry. He had no idea that when the insurance man reached out for the skull of the victim he would suddenly leap, knocking the little man literally off his feet, pinning him against the concrete wall. He could hardly recognize as his own the voice that rasped: "Keep your hands off him! Just let him alone till the doctor gets here!"

"What the hell's the matter with you?" the little man said. "You a relative or something?"

People were always asking him that question. It made no sense.

"Just keep your dirty paws off him!" He went back beside the sick man, dropped to his knees and replaced the oxygen cup which had fallen aside. He took up the limp hand again, but there was no response in it. The insurance man stayed with his back to the wall, watching Harry with narrowed eyes, anxious to fulfill his duties but ready to run if that frigging maniac made another wild move.

Like a late spring, the doctor at last arrived. Wisps of gray hair stuck out at random from under his hat, and the look of his face drained Harry's anger at his slowness. He seemed himself a sick man. Harry stood aside; the doctor listened with his stethoscope, thumbed back an eyelid, shone a small light on the pupil. He stood again, turning to Harry.

"The ambulance is at the freight entrance. How do we get there?"

"I can show you, or I'll go up the elevator and lead them in if you want."

"Yes, do that, please."

As Harry trotted down the hall he could hear behind him the sharp, complaining voice of the insurance man begin to gnaw away.

The freight elevator rose with the speed of a great glacier melting. In the alley two ambulance attendants leaned on the rear fender of the long sleek machine, smoking and exchanging views on television comedians, a conversation they continued while unloading the stretcher and following Harry back down the elevator, though he had to admit they moved quickly enough. Tonight after work they planned to listen to Bob Hope and laugh their heads off.

With deft efficiency the attendants loaded the man and carried the stretcher up the tunnel. The little insurance man backed off a step and shut up as Harry approached the doctor. He was glad to see that the doctor now had charge of the sick man's wallet.

"How is he?" asked Harry.

"Dead."

"How about the oxygen? Did that—?"

"It couldn't have hurt."

Harry turned away, and the insurance man stepped forward. "You're sure it was heart, not any kind of fall or injury." It was an insistence, not a question. "We'll need a statement from you, doctor."

Gunnison was in good spirits. The noon show with the ballplayers had drawn an overflow crowd, the merchandise drawing had been won by a white Protestant woman whose name would look good in the ads, people had stood in line all day for the trout tank and for the barbecued ribs in the sportswear department, the sales clerks were all reporting record days. So who cared if the fashions buyer was bitching that a couple of the models were insolent to her? Gunnison had personally looked at each of them and found them more to his taste than most models. He had even felt one of them and encountered nothing but encouragement. He cordially chewed Harry's ass about getting more trout, more ribs, more cosmetic samples, and more excitement in the ads, but this was just to keep him on the ball, nothing personal. The claims man had reported the store was in the clear, and Gunnison had phoned editors he knew to make sure the obit was written without any reference to where the old man had keeled over. No use letting the suckers think the crowd was that bad.

By four o'clock Harry's shoulder and ear ached from propping the

phone there while he scribbled notes for the organization of tomorrow's festivities. His brain was a collage of names, numbers, places, appointments, schedules, and the nagging irrational worry that he was forgetting an important task. He dialed the number of Jan's office and got a busy signal. He gave up and walked out of the office.

Near the main floor exit he encountered Lisa, and he asked her how the fashion show had gone.

"Nutty. You want a bar of facial soap?"

"No thanks. I swab mine with alcohol." The number tag on her dress lay along her left breast, which was, as Byron said, large. "You get many customer questions on the dress?"

"Quite a few. Hey, who's the big red-faced bird who acts like he owns the place?"

"Mr. E. B. Gunnison. Head of advertising."

"I thought he was the local chiropractor, the way he was working my spine. But he acted like he was entitled. Should I send him a bill?"

"You might be able to work out a small merchandise order."

"That mustache would make it worth extra. That looks like a real tit tickler." But she lost interest in Gunnison, having a new thought: "Hey, by the way, have you seen Nick Philbert lately?"

"Over the weekend. Saturday, I guess it was."

"How did he act to you?"

"A bit disturbed."

"Man, that's the word!" Lisa stepped to one side, extended a sample bar of soap to a passing lady, gave her a nice smile, then dropped back into her horrified expression for Harry. "Like, he's out of it! You know what he wanted? He wanted me to bathe his feet and dry 'em with my hair!"

"Did he call you Mary?"

Eyes narrow in suspicion. "How'd you know? Is this some gag you worked out?"

"No. It was very old before my time. How'd Byron take it?"

"You know Byron. He's cool."

She really loves him, thought Harry. And he loves her. So why should love come so hard to a nice normal guy like me? "What did Byron say?"

She shrugged it away as too difficult. "I don't know. They were arguing about seven wise virgins and seven foolish virgins or some crazy crap. I went in the can and locked the door. What time you want us to start work tomorrow?"

"Better be here by ten, at the stockroom again. So long, Lisa."

"You quitting already? Man, you really fell into a soft touch here."

24

"No, no money. That's out . . . Look, the girls are getting actual fashion modeling experience of the kind you can't offer them in your school. Besides that, you get credit in our newspaper ads, posters in the store at the fashion showings—and you'll get first call from us whenever we need models for photographic work." Footsteps in the hall outside, ponderous, pontifical. Have to cut it short. "Sorry to interrupt, but other business has come up. Listen, you think it over and I'll call you back this afternoon. I want a firm answer then. We'll need the girls tomorrow, and I've got other offers to consider. Good-bye." And got the receiver down just as Dr. Kasper sedately closed the door behind him.

Direct from his early class of native American illiterates, Harry had come to Kasper's cosy cubbyhole. By request, for a final analysis of the upcoming Master's oral. He had been up till three last night reading Carlyle's *French Revolution,* then slept four fitful hours dreaming intermittently of battles and a dank tunnel which had no exit. Of course, four hours had been enough for Edison. Imagine what he might have invented had he gotten a decent night's sleep.

"Good morning, Harry! And how are you this fine morn, in this world where much is to be done and little to be known?"

"Okay, I guess. I'll let you know after I wake up."

Dr. Kasper laughed with pleasure, anticipating his reply. "I have, all my life long, been lying till noon; yet I tell all young men that nobody who does not rise early will ever do any good." Getting off

two Johnsonian quotes so quickly put Kasper in a good mood. His identity established, he could relapse for a time into his late dull incarnation. He slid his chair out from the desk, lowered himself with dignity, and regarded Harry with sympathetic understanding. "Well, are you prepared for the great ordeal?"

"Does any candidate feel prepared?"

"Perhaps not. I'm sure I didn't, back when I took the M.A." A rumbling chuckle. "That was in the early pleistocene era, as you may imagine."

"Lately, the more I read, the more I have the feeling I don't know a damn thing about English literature. I have, at best, the most superficial acquaintance with the major works of the few authors made famous by the rather arbitrary judgment of history."

"Arbitrary? Whose reputation do you distrust?"

"The great Milton's, for one." In a sing-song voice:

> " 'But come, thou Goddess fair and free,
> In Heaven, yclept Euphrosyne,
> And by men heart-easing Mirth;
> Whom lovely Venus, at a birth,
> With two sister Graces more,
> To ivy-crowned Bacchus bore;'
> . . . Burma Shave."

All in character again, Kasper looked grave. "Milton, sir, was a genius that could cut a Colossus from a rock; but he could not carve heads upon cherry-stones."

Really walked right into that one, didn't we. Sitting here feeding straight lines while the mad Gunnison rides the tiger and howls my name. Better get on with it. "Don't worry, I'll be respectful of all the big heroes during the exam. Is there anything special I should be working on?"

"There's one possible change in the examining board. The twentieth century man I mentioned, Dr. McIntyre, is having a bit of trouble passing some gallstones. So Dr. Lysander will question you on the moderns. I'm sorry."

Lysander. Sorry. "I've never had a course from him," said Harry, probing.

Dr. Kasper pursed his full lips. Like doctors, professors are cautious about voicing criticisms of their colleagues. "Dr. Lysander has been with the department for several years," he said. "He has, uh, certain strong preferences not always dictated by literary excellence."

"Meaning?"

"In articles for the learned journals, Dr. Lysander often attacks contemporary works using a framework of Freudian analysis as reference. He wrote a rather—shall we say, interesting—monograph on Faulkner's inability to properly dramatize his repressed anal sexuality and masturbatory instincts."

"Oh, Christ! One of those nuts."

"I would remind you that you are the candidate; he is the examiner. Your future will be shaped by your attitude as well as by your answers."

"It's like a fraternity Hell Week, isn't it. You crawl on your knees while they paddle you, or you don't get into the club."

Dr. Kasper looked at Harry as Johnson might have looked at a Boswell who had just said bugger the King. Then, taking a kindly tone; "Just what do you want from life, Harry?"

Well, now. A sincere question richly deserving of an honest answer.

"I guess I want to see God and make a million dollars." Harry paused, sorry to have caused that look on Kasper's face. "Not in that order, necessarily," he said. "In fact, I never want *both* those things. I take turns wanting one, then the other."

Kasper balanced a pencil across a pudgy forefinger. "Perhaps you don't believe I'm trying to help you, Harry."

"I firmly believe it."

"Then answer my question."

"I want to pass this damned exam, get my degree and credential so I can become a useful member of the community." And not have to peddle bras in brothels, or pose in the nude, or push dirty photos, or any of the other sad little shifts open to misfits.

"You think you will find satisfaction in teaching, as a career?"

"I don't know. I'm so hung up with the roadblocks they put in my way I've almost forgotten why I ever wanted to teach."

"Do you enjoy your two classes of practice-teaching?"

"Sometimes, but I hate all the crappy progress reports and pseudo-planning Willhunt puts me through. It's all such a waste of time!"

Dr. Kasper sighed as deeply as his tight vest would permit. "I worry about you, Harry. I do have considerable responsibility as your faculty advisor. I'm not sure I understand why you are getting a junior-college credential."

"Because Willhunt told me I'm not fit to teach high school. I couldn't swallow all that garbage and cough it back up in nice little predigested slogans. I don't believe the school's job is teaching socio-economic group adjustment, and I made the mistake of saying so."

Dr. Kasper settled back comfortably in his chair. Now he had a nice theoretical argument to get his teeth into. "Perhaps you believe, along with our state superintendent, that the school should revert back to pounding away at the three R's and the Flag Salute."

Sweet Jesus. The store could be a shambles, with Gunnison heating the tools to pull out my fingernails, and this old balloon wants to talk theory-of-education. "The state superintendent is a nut, and we all know it. He thinks you can teach patriotism by pretending this country has no faults. And he's a nut to think he can have any effect on an education hierarchy that's been building up for twenty years."

Kasper smiled. "Yet you seem to share his wish to go back to good old fundamentals."

Harry shook his head irritably. "I just want to teach English in English class, not social problems or self-analysis. Look, this argument is pointless. I suspect that anybody halfway competent soon forgets all this Education Department drivel and develops a teaching method based on actual experience. That's what I plan to do."

"You think you will be allowed to function independently at the junior-college level?" With a knowing smile.

"It'll depend a lot on the school I get. And on my own ability in the situation. But I'm anxious to try."

"I fear you are bound to be disappointed, Harry. Your colleagues will be little men, bureaucrats, taking comfort in the very jargon and ritual you detest." A thoughtful pause. "You may recall that I once urged you to consider a position with the college. I can safely assure you a teaching fellowship will be open, provided you do well in the oral."

"Provided I start to work on my Ph.D."

"Naturally. The doctorate is a sign of serious scholarship, a declaration that one is determined to explore one's own field."

Harry stood up. "The doctorate is an endless, fruitless exercise in hair-splitting. Its purpose is to protect the privileged status of its holders, and the side-effect is a teacher so lost in his private swamp he has no mental energy left to give his students."

Kasper's cheeks billowed as he exhaled through pursed lips. Harry was really being impossible today. No doubt the strain he was under just now. Bide the time. "Keep it in mind, Harry, what I said. Ask yourself if it might be laziness, this shirking the Ph.D. You could do it, you know, if you make up your mind."

Embarrassed then at his gross ingratitude for Kasper's efforts, Harry simply nodded, lifted a hand in farewell, and walked out.

As he hurried across to the faculty parking lot, Harry took a quick look at his watch. Nine twenty-five already, wow. Another twenty minutes to get down to the store—there will be hell to pay. He reached the car and yanked the door handle.

In the driver's seat sat Nick Philbert, hunched over the wheel, mumbling to himself. He had a two-day dark stubble, and his hair was uncombed. The eyes he turned on Harry took a few seconds to focus in recognition.

"For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing," shouted Nick. "And their eyes have closed, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and I should heal them!"

Harry dropped his books into the back seat and slid in beside Nick. "How're you feeling, man?"

"How do I look?"

"Like the day before Easter. Why don't you give it up and try another kick."

"You know where I can get a fix?"

"I don't mean that kick. You've done that already."

Nick turned on him, his voice sharp. "I'm not kidding. I need it. Just one, to see me through." Suddenly louder. "I've got to have a fix!"

Harry made a placating gesture. "Cool it, will you? Let's not be hollering fix here in the faculty lot. You'd be surprised how many old profs aren't junkies."

Nick slumped over the wheel, resting against his arms, forehead against the backs of his hands. "Help me. You gotta help me connect."

"I don't use it, remember? You're the one with the connection. Get it where you always got it."

"I can't. He put me down."

"You owe him? I can loan you—"

"No, no! He put me down cause I tried to *save* him. I told him I'd turn him in, get him busted if he didn't quit pushing." Nick shoved himself back from the wheel. His movements were quick spasms.

"It was for his own good! I tried to show him what a low, dirty, rotten, despicable thing a pusher is!"

"Like pearls before swine, your wisdom, eh?"

"Yeah. Yeah." Sadly now, the mood sliding from anger to despair.

"He'll never sell to me again. He said he'd get me beat up if he ever *saw* me again. He's really an unpleasant guy."

"Nick, I'm sorry about your problems, but I'm late for work, man, so will you please—"

But Nick wasn't listening. "Gimme the keys, man. Let's go."

"Go where?"

"Down to the Fillmore. We can cruise around. There's lots of connections there, man. Come on, gimme the keys!" He held his hand out, fingers snapping impatiently.

"No, Nick. I'm sorry. Now slide out from behind that wheel."

"Okay, okay, if that's what's bugging you. You drive." Nick slid out, ran quickly around the front of the car and climbed in as Harry settled into the driver's seat. "It'll be better this way," he said, slamming the door. "When I see the connection I can hop right out."

Fighting back the urge to yell, Harry said patiently, "Listen. I have a *job*. I'm late for that job, and getting later. I'm missing classes left and right. I'm hung up six different ways, and I'm *not* spending the day cruising around the Fillmore looking for a pusher."

Nick stared at him for a moment. "Three times shalt thou betray me before the cock crows!" he intoned hollowly.

"Come off it. The Messiah bit is wearing thin, and you know it. All you had was an acid jag! Climb back into reality, man."

While Harry was speaking, a sly and unexpected smile crept over Nick's face. "I have a duty to you, Harry. Remember? For the good

of your soul. You and I have to go see the Dean about that test I took for you."

Harry wondered if the momentary fear had shown on his face. Just how crazy was Nick? Would he go through with it?

"I don't think you'd do that to me."

"Not *to* you. It's something I have to do *for* you. You'll never see God while that sin's on your conscience."

"I suppose you'll be willing to leave my soul in darkness if I drive you around till you score, is that it?"

Nick was silent, refusing now to meet Harry's eyes.

"Well, man, if that's the case, you just go ahead and see the Dean, and if I don't get there, you two start without me. Because I don't dig being blackmailed, especially by some lame cat who's trying to come on like Christ in order to feed his habit. Now climb out and let me get to work!"

Nick was rolling his head in an agony of embarrassment. He wiped his nose across the back of his hand. "Aw, maaaan . . ."

"I mean it! There's only one place I'll drive you, and that's the psychiatric clinic. You're flipping, and I should have had the guts to lay it on you straight when you first started, instead of going along with you. Look at me! I want to help you, I really do, so let's go to the clinic. I'll go in and sweat it out with you until you get some help, even if I get fired from this goddam job—"

Nick shoved open the car door and scrambled out onto the asphalt. He stared at Harry with frightened eyes. "I thought we were friends, man."

"I thought so, too. That's why I know you're sick, or you wouldn't be threatening to get me thrown out of school."

Suddenly crafty again: "I still could do that, you know."

"Yeah, you could. I just have to hope you won't. Like I hope you don't go raving around the campus after a fix till they call the heat to get you. Now either climb in or let go that door handle."

"You really think I'm crazy?"

"You're getting pretty close."

"Don't worry. I'll make it. He slammed the door shut and stepped back with a cocky wave. Harry ground the starter and gunned the engine as it caught. The tires squealed as he turned out of the parking area onto the boulevard, heading downtown.

Take a deep breath, fill that hollow. Serve you right if he rats. You think he didn't know that was a threat, that offer to haul him off to the clinic? You're a lot of help, you busy little business man. Get out of my way, you nut, I'm late for work.

Some days you just can't please that conscience.

Traffic had fallen off a bit through most of the store, but this was expected. Opening day is always the biggest. There were still plenty of people, and the crowd around the trout tank was large and noisy.

Gunnison caught up with him while he was hooking up the mike for Fox's noon show on the main-floor stage. Harry tried to look like an employee who's been at work since dawn.

"Where the hell have you been?" growled Gunnison.

"All over the store. Looks like business is good."

"Fair. What's the noon show?"

"Couple of pro football players from the home team. Big stars."

"What about the other floors? Anything going on?"

"That chess expert from the newspaper takes on all comers in the game department at two. At three the doctor is autographing his book and giving all the ladies a thrill."

"Doctor? What doctor?"

Harry couldn't resist. "Jesus, don't you read our ads?"

"Just the ones with merchandise in them. What frigging doctor?"

"The sex doctor. The one who wrote *How to Lick Your Frigidity* and all those other best sellers."

"We paying him?"

"Why should we? He's selling books."

Gunnison looked thoughtfully at Harry and bit at one end of his bushy mustache. "Y'know, I gotta hand it to you. If I didn't know better, I'd think there was a lot going on in this store. You keep this up all week and I might have to find a real job for you." He turned and walked off into the hat department, leaving Harry with his jaw hanging.

Man, you just never knew.

25

Garcia came up to Harry's desk after class Wednesday morning, his dark, thick-lipped face a mixture of wariness and hope.

"I didn' get no notice," he said, as if puzzled.

"Notice of what?" Harry dropped his notebook and text into his scarred imitation-leather briefcase and zipped it shut. Then he purposely set it down on the desk, so as not to make Garcia nervous by his obvious wish to get out of there.

"Notice about that term paper."

"I told you I wouldn't report you if you'd write the paper yourself."

"I didn' believe you." A pause, then plaintively. "Now I can't do it by Friday."

"Then hand it in on Monday. That's all the time I can give you. I've got to send in your grade next week." Harry involuntarily picked up his briefcase, then made himself put it down again.

"What I'm supposed to write about?"

Why not tell us how you swam the Rio Grande in the dark of night to the everlasting discredit of the border guard. Now, now, none of that. Stamp out the bigot within. Pretend he's a blue-eyed blond with milk white skin. Dumb albino.

"The class assignment was to write about a book you've read. Tell your reaction to the book and why you feel that way about it."

"I don' read very much."

"Look, Francisco, I don't care if you write about a *comic* book. What I'm after is your response to something you've read. The idea is that the printed word is supposed to move people to thought or emotion. Having been moved by someone else's words, you then use words to convey your reaction. That's what this course is all about, really."

Garcia watched him with a half-lidded unblinking gaze, mouth slightly parted. Finally he said, "Okay. Monday, huh?"

"Monday." Harry grabbed his briefcase and started for the door. He thought of asking Garcia how his sister was feeling these days, but for once he managed to hold his tongue. He had about all the difficulty he could handle.

The rain-slick streets around the store were jammed with traffic. Someone had skidded on the old streetcar tracks and mashed a fender; cars were backed up, honking, for a block behind the accident while the drivers exchanged insurance data. Harry waited for a break in the opposing traffic, yanked the old Ford out of the stalled line, went fifty yards down the wrong side of the street, and swerved into the loading alley behind the store. He parked opposite the freight elevators, two wheels up on the narrow sidewalk to give the delivery trucks room. He was walking rapidly toward the corner when he heard the subterranean rumble, and the steel plates in the sidewalk unfolded like petals around the bloom of the freight elevator. On it stood Byron, suave as a country squire in his tweed coat and unlit pipe, the one with the leather-covered bowl. Around his feet were several cardboard boxes of various sizes, with the tops folded shut. Harry was afraid there might be some mistake.

"Hi, man. You got my message, didn't you? About not needing the models."

"Oh, sure. I just came down to pick up some stuff."

"I'm sorry the gig wasn't longer, but I got some other chicks from a modeling school for free, and I've got to stay in the budget."

"No sweat, man. You want to give me a hand with this?" Byron lifted the biggest of the boxes and started across the alley, slanting toward his old green sedan. Harry realized then the car had looked familiar, but he was in too much of a hurry to think about it. He should be upstairs, but what the hell, Byron had come through for him, so he hoisted a couple of the smaller boxes under each arm and

walked across the alley. Byron was already wedging the big box into the trunk beside the spare tire.

"What's in here, man? It's heavy."

"Just some stuff we gathered up. Soap samples and things."

Harry felt a qualm, a big one. "I know I told Lisa she could grab some of the sample stuff, but I didn't figure you'd be hauling it away by the carload."

Byron turned to give him a funny look. "You buy stock in the store?"

"No, but—"

"So what's it to you?" Byron turned and started shoving again to force the big box in under the trunk lid. A taped seam split, revealing a rich dark fabric. Harry reached in past Byron, grabbed at the top flap of the box and pulled.

"Holy Christ!"

"Man, what's the matter with you," said Byron irritably. "I can't screw around here all morning. Lisa's waiting up in the dressing rooms with another load."

"But—tuxedos!"

"You can pawn those, man. Easy. Twenty bucks each."

"I should hope so. They cost a hundred and ten."

"Try to tell that to a pawnbroker."

"What's in all these other boxes?"

"Cosmetics and junk jewelry in those little ones. The ones on the elevator are pajamas and neckties."

"Son of a bitch. You must have a thousand dollars worth of merchandise out here."

Not without pride: "This is about half of it."

"And I'm helping you load it. Jesus, God! Grab that box and get it back to the elevator, quick. Come on!"

Byron was too shocked to be angry. He trailed Harry across the street, trying to reason with him. "Don't be crazy! We can't get that stuff put back without getting caught. It was hard enough getting it out in the first place."

Harry dropped the two small cartons onto the elevator platform, turned and dashed back across the alley. He fought the big box out of the trunk, half expecting to feel Byron's fist in his kidneys. He got it out and carried it back, one dark sleeve dangling from the split in

the carton. He yanked the down cord, and the platform began slowly to sink. Byron stepped on at the last moment, looking crushed by this betrayal.

The street rose up around their eyes; the steel petals began to fold over them and their world darkened. "Man, I sure never expected this from you," said Byron. "I pulled you out of a jam, getting those chicks to model."

"And you got paid, the price you asked."

"So how does it hurt you if we take a little bonus? It's us against the system, isn't it? Don't you hate the system?"

"Stealing as a form of social protest is out, man. Nobody digs it. They put you away."

What a long slow ride in this accusative silence. The virtue of an hydraulic lift is its great strength, not its speed, as my old high school physics teacher once said. Accused of innocence and found guilty by my former friend, and already I miss him, having so few. Will the house detective be waiting at the bottom of the shaft for us? How awkward to have Byron for a cellmate, one to ten with time off for good behavior. His big brown eyes saying month after month that it's all my fault, my stupid scruples.

There was no one in the basement freight terminal except a stock boy Harry had never seen before. He obligingly helped them load Byron's loot onto a hand truck, and Harry wheeled it off. He ditched it in a display storeroom behind a batch of window flats, until he could find time to smuggle the stuff back into stock. Then they went up to women's sportswear to find Lisa.

"Jeez, it's about time," she said. "That bitchy buyer has been giving me the fish eye. The stuff's under a curtain in the dressing rooms. I'll get it."

"Don't bother," said Byron. "Meet Sergeant Friday."

Lisa looked at Harry blankly. "I don't get it."

"He'll fink on us. He saw me taking the stuff out to the car and made me bring it back."

"You'll get caught," said Harry patiently. "There's a running inventory, with punch cards and a computer. It knows exactly what's been sold, what's in stock, and what's missing."

"I spent an hour talking to the store dick yesterday," said Byron. "He's too dumb to catch crabs in a whorehouse."

"He doesn't have to be smart," said Harry. "The machine does that. You worked here two days and your whole history is on a little punch card. Pawn one item of that stuff and you'll have cops knocking on the door before you know what happened."

Harry could see they felt he was only making excuses for the gaucherie of being honest. The department was getting more crowded even as they stood there, the early customers beginning to drift in. He was crazy to stand there arguing with them. "Where's the stuff?" he asked Lisa. "Which dressing room?"

"Find it yourself," she said haughtily. "Square!"

Together she and Byron walked down the aisle toward the stairs, their manner giving the impression they were on the way to a diamond auction and had stumbled into this flea market by mistake. The public address system was playing "Over the Waves" on a circus calliope.

Harry located the pile of suit boxes tied with a heavy cord, grabbed it up and ducked out of the dressing room, just in time to meet a startled lady coming in. He bowed and smiled, stepped around her and lugged his burden down to the cubbyhole which housed the reel of fire hose and a couple of extinguishers. Then he hurried upstairs to the offices to let himself be seen by Gunnison and Linden. The thought of the day ahead made him feel old and weary.

He had gotten Gunnison's initialed OK on the Carnival ads for tomorrow and was going over the list of new models from the school with Linden when Grady Woods staggered into the office, batting his eyes and working his jaw like a diver abruptly surfaced. His hands were clutching his temples.

"God damn!" he croaked. "Right beside it! Ooooh, my *head!*"

"What's the matter?" asked Linden. "You sick?"

"Your goddam sound system! Almost blew my head off!" He gulped, yawned, and stretched his jaw again.

And sure enough, they could hear it now. Through four floors and no telling how many walls the merry-go-round played away, the thumps of the mechanical drum like distant mortar volleys. It was a full hundred-watt amplifier. Ah, there, music lovers.

By the time they charged out onto the mezzanine where the great speakers were hung, the main floor below was nearly deserted. One

woman in luggage was clutching gloved hands to her ears and screaming to equalize the pressure in her head, but her frail sound was utterly lost in the smashing roar and grind of the merry-go-round. The sheer impact of sound brought a flush to the skin, a hot prickling sensation. Harry ran for the amplifier room while Linden tried unsuccessfully to pull the wires out of the back of the solidly-built speaker. Down on the main floor clerks writhed in attitudes suggestive of the Bosch rendering of Hell. A skinny lad in men's socks had his head buried in the counter merchandise and was raking socks over his head with frantic movements of his arms. Foley was propped stiffly against the wall amid his beloved hats, an unaccountable smile on his face. Even from the mezzanine Harry could see the rim of white around the dark iris of his eyes.

The door was stuck.

He wrenched the knob left then right and pulled back hard. It came off in his hand. The mechanical bells were clanging a staccato passage, building to the climactic ending of the piece. The tune was unrecognizable, the melody lost in the wild distortion and reverberating echoes. Harry lifted a foot and kicked at the door. As it collapsed open, he lunged through, diving for the cord and yanking it from the socket.

He was sitting on the floor beside the machine, gulping like a beached fish when Linden came in, with the gait of a man sleepwalking. "What will you play for your next selection?" he asked mildly. He sounded very dim and far away.

"I was thinking of leaving the machine off for a while."

"Really? As long as you let it go, I thought you were enjoying it."

Harry found the doorknob still in his hand, so he held it up. Linden looked thoughtfully at it, then frowned. "Sabotage?"

"That's possible," said Harry. "But who?"

"Somebody from another store? We'd better try that, anyhow, when we talk to Gunnison."

"You think Gunnison has to know about this?"

"It's the sort of thing that's hard to keep quiet, what with customers screaming and clerks fainting and what not."

Harry pulled the cover off the tape machine, worked a tube loose and stuck it in his pocket, just to be sure nobody started the thing up again until the technician from the rental place checked the sys-

tem out. Linden would get the carpenter to put a new lock on the door and would personally take care of the key.

Half an hour later the store was once more full of happy shoppers, and aside from a few headaches among the clerks there seemed to be no great damage. Harry quickly got too busy to worry about the inevitable chewing from Gunnison. He met the new models from the school and introduced them to the fashion buyer, who briefed them on the style show and the sample handouts. He met the sound technician and helped him to set up a new speaker at one end of the mezzanine. The vast flood of noise had ripped the cone in this speaker, but the others throughout the main floor had survived intact. In between times he worked at distributing Byron and Lisa's loot back into the proper departments. A little before noon he found Grady at his desk in their mutual cubicle and went in to talk to him.

"About the music blowup this morning—since you were down on the mezzanine, why didn't you shut the machine off?"

Grady glanced briefly at him, then went back to correcting an ad proof. "Up yours," he said.

There is a lot of satisfaction in hitting someone smaller than you. Harry was measuring the distance to Grady's jaw and wondering whether he could knock him clear out of the chair, when the phone rang. It was Ed Fox, wanting him to come down right away and set up the mike and props for the noon show. Harry hung up the phone and moved toward the doorway.

"In your ear," said Grady, by way of a parting sentiment.

There were quite a few people crowding the area near the wooden stage platform. Harry quickly hooked up the mike and set up the day's only prop, a basketball hoop and net on a tall tripod frame. Standing on the far side of the stage with Fox were the guests, the seven-foot Negro center from the pro team, and a diminutive figure in riding silks of brilliant orange and purple. The Negro was holding a basketball cupped beneath one spreading hand, faking it this way and that, grinning an easy smile. At the edge of the stage a chunky man in a pearl gray suit called out, "Hey, how's the weather up there?" then laughed proudly at his witticism. The Negro forced his grin a bit wider and looked toward the man briefly in acknowledgment, while a tired line around his eyes said

he'd heard that question before. The jockey, a leather-faced little man who had apparently been sucking a lime, suddenly slapped a wooden chair with the riding whip he carried, making a loud noise. He seemed irritated that the tall center was getting most of the crowd's attention, and Fox was talking soothingly to him when Harry walked up to them.

"—so I'll talk to him first, get him out of the way, then you and I can take as much time as we want, okay?" When the jockey didn't answer, Fox turned to Harry. "Harry, this is Richie Florofino. He's one of the top riders on the West Coast."

"*Any*where," said Florofino. He had a startlingly high-pitched voice, but the sharpness of it took away any suggestion of boyishness.

"Nice to know you," said Harry. "We appreciate your coming down here today."

"I got conned into it," said Florofino.

"I think I'd better start the interview," said Fox. "Take good care of Richie for a few minutes, will you? I'll be ready for him before long." Fox turned, gestured the tall Negro toward the mike, and held up his hands to the crowd. There was a round of hand-clapping and a few cheers, then Fox launched smoothly into his string of questions, which the Negro answered with quiet modesty, seeming almost embarrassed at his record of points scored, rebounds handled, and so forth.

Harry and Florofino sat on the two wooden chairs at the back of the platform, a few yards behind the mike. Florofino looked slowly across the faces of the crowd, then settled on Harry.

"What's your angle in this?"

"I work for the store," said Harry softly, hoping the jockey would get the hint and not step on the interview.

"Doin' what?" said the jockey suspiciously.

"Well, keeping our sports guests happy, for one thing. Part of my job is taking you out to lunch after the interview and giving you a present from the store." Harry kept his voice low.

"What kinda present?"

"Today it's matching cuff links and tie pin."

"Probably junk. You wanta make me happy, get that big spook outa here. Spooks are bad luck. I ain't gonna eat with no spook."

"That's up to you," said Harry, with what he hoped was finality.

Fox had handed the tall center the basketball, and now he was effortlessly dumping one-handed push shots through the net from a distance of about ten feet out. Fox caught the ball as it swished through the net and tossed it back, while the crowd counted:—three, four, five, six, seven . . .

"Big deal." said Florofino's sharp little voice, but the counting of the crowd covered him.

The Negro made twelve shots in a row before one rolled around the rim and hopped out again. Fox caught it, waved a hand for the crowd as the applause signal, and they gave him a nice hand to close out that part of the show. Florofino was out of his chair and strutting to the front of the stage while they were still clapping, taking that as his entrance cue. For a moment he and the center stood side by side near the mike, and the contrast in size was so ludicrous that laughter gradually replaced the applause. The jockey glared and even made a brief flicking motion with his whip, but the center made a face of mock fright and backed off, making the whole thing look like a rehearsed bit of fooling.

Harry stood and shook hands with the Negro as he moved to the back of the platform, indicating the chair for him. "Nice going."

"Thank you," he said with a grin. He sat down on the plain chair, folding and arranging his long limbs like a man storing a set of stepladders. Fox was lowering the mike for the jockey.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "all of you who follow the Sport of Kings will recognize one of our finest young riders, a man who's come up fast this last year, Richie Florofino."

Florofino waved and cracked his whip against his thigh, but the crowd response was scattered. A heckler somewhere on the left side called loudly, "Where's Fulkerson?"

Fox decided to smile, but didn't quite make it. "Those of you who read the papers know that jockey Art Fulkerson was to have been our guest today, but after that ad was prepared, Fulkerson was thrown in the last race yesterday and is in the hospital with a broken collar bone. Richie here kindly consented to fill in, and we're lucky to have him, because he knows all about the business of racing. Richie, maybe you can tell us what happened in that last race yesterday."

Florofino grinned. "I won 'it," he said. There was a ripple of laughter at his high-pitched voice.

"I mean," said Fox, "what happened to Fulkerson?"

"He fell on his head. Lucky for him there's nothin' in there to hurt." Florofino gave a cackle of laughter, and Fox forced a chuckle to help it look like he was kidding, but the crowd wasn't at all sure.

"What about the third race?" called the heckler. Harry spotted him this time, a tall guy with a beaked nose and prominent Adam's apple. He had a voice that was hard to ignore.

"Do you want to say anything about the third race, Richie?" asked Fox, sounding a bit worried.

"That horse should be cut up for dog meat," snapped Florofino. "He wins a coupla races against old nags too far gone to pull a plow, so all the suckers make him a favorite in the third race. He's a vet's dream, he's got so much wrong with him."

"You let him run wide," called the heckler.

There were five seconds of deep silence. Florofino tipped his orange silk hat onto the back of his little round skull.

"Screw you, Jack!" he said with great distinctness.

Fox cleared his throat lengthily, which didn't really change anything. "Well, uh . . ." he said into the mike. "I guess we all know that, uh . . . horse racing is a fast and dangerous business, uh . . . and jockeys are, uh . . . tend to be . . . quick-tempered."

Another pristine silence followed this explanation. The crowd stood with upturned faces, staring at Florofino with a mixture of awe and wounded propriety. He seemed to find their looks offensive, for he suddenly grabbed the mike out of Fox's hand. "All you crummy two-dollar betters," he piped angrily, "you think it's the jock's fault when a favorite don't come in! But it's pea-brains like you that make some bone-heap the favorite! You think it's easy to boot them winners home! You think it's a Sunday canter in the park! I'd like to see you rail-birds on a horse comin' outa that starting gate or in a four-way jam at the first turn! You'd fall on your ass and damage your brains! Sure, you cheer for a jock when he's in the winner's circle—just like you cheer for this big jig shovin' a ball through a hoop! I'd like to see *him* handle a horse. He'd be sittin' in the saddle draggin' both black nigger feet in the dirt!"

"Now wait just a minute—" said Fox, struggling for the mike.

"That's right, that's right," squeaked Florofino in a rage, "the sheenies and the spooks gotta stick together! A real American ain't got a chance any more between the two—"

At this instant Harry, moving fast, pulled out the plug connecting the mike with the PA system. The crowd was yelling and booing so that without electronic help Florofino had no chance of making his shrill treble heard over the noise. Harry plugged in the music from the tape recorder, and the circus calliope rained the brisk notes of the Colonel Bogie March down on the heads of the crowd.

Feeling his moment of glory past, Florofino waved a stiffened arm and upthrust middle finger at all and sundry, leaped down off the side of the stand and headed for the door, clearing his path with vicious cuts of his short whip. People seemed anxious to give him plenty of room.

Fox held up the dead mike, gave an eloquent shrug, then clutched his head like an elder of Jerusalem at the wailing wall. The crowd began to disperse up the aisles. Linden found Harry a few minutes later still seated behind the giftwares counter, thoughtfully toying with the microphone plug.

"That was a real interesting show you and Ed put together today."

"Thanks. Tomorrow we exhibit the mating habits of monkeys."

"Fine. So long as it's in good taste. I'll see you at the unemployment office."

Ed Fox looked like a man recovering from a week of stomach flu, but the big Negro center was still calmly smiling. Harry made the lunch offer, but the center had another appointment, so Harry gave him both his own present and the one that would have gone to the jockey. He moved off with an easy wave of his remarkable arm. At the front door of the store somebody said, "Hey, how's the weather up there?"

"What can I say?" asked Fox. "He was the only jock I could get on short notice. I'm sorry. I'm double sorry."

"Not your fault," said Harry. "See you tomorrow."

The afternoon was eaten away in tiny segments by a swarm of trivial chores. There were forms to fill out regarding free models from the school. A questionnaire from the insurance company to determine the full extent of Harry's knowledge regarding the death by heart failure of one Herman Ulberg on the premises of the insured

company. A brief chat with Marvin Leon, the house detective, concerning the boxes of merchandise turning up in the right departments but the wrong inventory files, and Leon's budding suspicion there might be some kind of thievery ring developing. Harry promised to keep an eye open and report any suspicious moves by store personnel. The ad proofs for tomorrow morning's papers came back and had to be corrected for typos and revamped to fit a last minute change in the time of appearance of Deputy Dan, a children's television celebrity, in the boys' wear department. Tonight, Harry recalled with dismay, he had to read over the Cavalier poets, the major works of Browning, and the satire of Jonathan Swift. Therefore it was senseless to call Jan with the idea of seeing her. But call her he did, at three-ten, at three-forty-five, and again at four-fifteen. She could not be located in the office and was presumed to be on a research job at the library. He left a message to call him.

At four-thirty the summons came, and together Harry and Linden walked the gloomy corridor to the office of E. B. Gunnison. Inside, a surprise awaited them: the neat small body and owlishly inquisitive head of Sherwood L. Murvyn III, Board Chairman of Stylewise Inc. They were not invited to sit, and so stood awkwardly before Gunnison's big desk like a couple of choir boys hauled up before the Bishop. From the real leather armchair in the corner Murvyn said in his undertaker's voice, "Well, boys, how's the Carnival going?"

"It's going very well," said Linden at once. "We're generating a lot of traffic. We put a counter on the main front door between twelve and two today, and we got a little over three thousand people during that time." He paused briefly. "Of course we've had a few little difficulties, minor matters, but no more than we should expect in a promotion of this scope."

Murvyn nodded sagely, and Gunnison combed his mustache with an index finger. "I hear we had a little trouble with the taped music this morning," he said, looking directly at Harry.

"Somebody got at the machine," said Harry. "It was too loud for a while, but we fixed it so that won't happen again." Too loud, that's well put. Like saying the south pole might be a trifle chilly.

"You mean someone tampered with the controls?" asked Murvyn, sitting up straight with childlike enthusiasm.

"We think it must have been someone from a rival store," said

Linden. "There's no doubt we're hurting the competition this week."

Murvyn chuckled. Gunnison cleared his throat, moving a wide sheet of graph paper over in front of him. "Our overall sales figures so far this week show an increase of twenty-four point three percent over the same days last week, and nineteen point eight percent over the same week last year. That's not bad."

"I think the entire advertising department is to be congratulated on this promotion," said Murvyn, standing. "And I think efforts should be redoubled to make the remainder of the week even more successful." He gave each of them his curt little smile.

Harry was too surprised to do much but get out of Murvyn's way, but Linden was ready to open the door for him as he departed. Harry began sidling that way, but Gunnison motioned for Linden to shut the door again. Then he gestured for them to come toward his desk, like a coach about to share a locker room joke with a couple of his star players. They'd all earned a good laugh.

"Just between the three of us," said Gunnison, "you are in very big trouble, and you will have to work very hard to keep me from hanging you by the balls from the highest flagpole in the vicinity."

"The noon show was my fault," said Harry. "Linden had nothing to do with that."

Gunnison made the motion of shooing away a fly. "I heard about your noon show, and my sympathies are all with the jockey. I also got several accounts of the music fiasco this morning, and my feeling is it's damn well time something woke up those main-floor clerks. Maybe we should turn the machine up every morning."

"Then what's the problem?" asked Linden.

"I had a little talk with our insurance man today, at his request. A vice-president, one of those they keep to do the dirty jobs. He finds in the small print of our liability policy a thing he calls an "unnatural hazard" clause. We are doing things in this store not directly related to our business, and we are creating special dangers thereby." Gunnison let his voice taper to softness, honing their attention. The crack of his steel ruler across the desk made them both jump. "As long as this God damn Carnival goes on, we're without one God damn cent of coverage! We're bare-ass naked to any kind of injury lawsuit! We're stuck for any and all damages to the store or anybody in it!"

"Can't we get some short-term coverage for an extra premium?" asked Linden in the tense silence.

"We can, for just about your annual wage. Shall we spend the money for that purpose?" He paused just long enough for Linden to shake his head. "Then I suggest that you two spend every waking moment seeing that nothing goes wrong this week, for if it does, I'll cut your most delicate parts into many small pieces. Good day, gentlemen."

26

Thursday morning bright and clear with the smell of sea fog still lingering over the campus, the laurel leaves bright with last night's moisture. Harry pushed open the heavy bronze door of the Education Building and walked the dark hallway to the office door of the wily Willhunt. There he hesitated a brief moment, telling his sphincter and lower intestine to relax, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

He closed the door crisply behind him, tried to look cool and yet polite as he crossed toward the desk. No one should have to look at that pretty pink face this early in the morning, expecially on a stomach braced only with stale coffee.

Dr. Willhunt was smiling, a disturbing but not uncommon phenomenon. "I see you received my little message."

"That's why I'm here."

"I suppose you think I'm going to put you through some little rigamarole about classroom progress reports or student evaluation studies. Something you consider an utter waste of time."

"I hope not."

Still he smiled, making Harry wish he were in on the joke. Then, in properly measured cadences indicating deep personal concern: "Are you quite sure you want to make a career in teaching, Harry?"

Eerie, how that question repeats itself. He did it the honor of pausing a few thoughtful seconds. "At my age Lincoln wasn't sure he wanted to go into politics."

"Meaning?"

"I think I want to teach. I think so enough to have invested this whole year in getting a credential. But I can't be certain until I've worked as a full-time teacher for a couple of years. Then I'll know what it's like."

"I believe I can save you all that time, Harry."

The look of anxiety creeping into Harry's face tickled Willhunt. He thoughtfully tweaked his smooth lower lip between a thumb and forefinger. "You see, I'm utterly convinced you would never become a good teacher. You'd be a disgrace to the profession."

Don't like the way he said that, not at all. "Why?"

Slowly relishing each word: "Because you are dishonest."

Yea, verily. The better to live through each day without making new enemies. Nothing so dangerous as uncontrolled honesty.

Willhunt made a little steeple of his fingers, smiling over them. "Don't you have anything to say to that charge?"

Dry mouth. Wish I could find a nice young girl to lend me a bit of spit. "Use every man according to his just desert, and who should 'scape whipping?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Shakespeare. Hamlet."

"A pity I don't have your classical background. I'm just a mere Doctor of Education, trying to do my duty as I see it. And my duty is to weed out those undesirables who cheat on tests."

The enemy within, the cramping bowel. Please teacher, may I go to the toilet? I can't think of any good lies while I'm trying so hard not to shit. "I guess you meant it when you said you were out to get me."

The smile says I succeeded, didn't I, while the bland voice protests: "There's no need to drag personality conflicts into this, Harry. It's a simple matter of fact." Willhunt lifted a printed test booklet by its corner, two fingers so as not to soil his hand, and tossed it onto the front of the desk. Visual Aids—Final Examination.

"Why should you be going through all my old test papers?"

"I had a most interesting little chat the other day with a former student, Nick Philbert. I think you know him."

"He's not rational these days. You should know that if you talked to him."

"I could see he was distraught. Apparently he's under some sort of pressure. But one of his chance remarks led me to get out this test booklet. That is not your printing."

"I had an injured hand. One finger in a splint."

"We can, if you wish, take the entire matter before the Dean."

Then, thank God, it hasn't yet been before the Dean.

"What's my alternative?"

"Simply drop your Education courses. Resign from the department, get out of it and stay out."

"I can't walk out on my dumbbell classes."

"There's very little left to do. I have a replacement who can read their term papers and give them a final. You'll turn over your grade records and evaluation reports to him."

"But it's too late in the semester to drop courses."

"It's past the deadline for dropping a course without penalty. You'll be given a grade of Incomplete in both your Education courses. This will make it quite difficult for you to re-enroll in the department, should you ever change your mind. An F is easily explainable by simple ignorance, but an Incomplete indicates a lack of character."

The acid taste of defeat by a hated antagonist. All these months of drudgery down the drain. Good-bye, Mr. Chips. Good-bye small sunny valley town where after class I'd coach the tennis team in the late spring afternoon, sweet senior girls in flowered cotton admiring my crisp forehand, generously ignoring my thinning hair. Good-bye secure comforting smell of chalk and floor wax, good-bye the dull but comradely meetings with the stern, benign principal regarding use of the gymnasium for the Hi-Y dance, with our friendly advisor Mr. Bailly carrying the day. Sweet Christ, I'm too old to run away to sea and rise from cabin boy to captain.

"You're very silent, Harry. Am I to assume that you agree to my terms?"

"Dr. Willhunt, you know what a farce that Visual Aids course is. If you like, I could take that final again today, here in your office, and get a better grade than is in that booklet. Let me prove it to you."

A small laugh crammed with satisfaction. "No, no. You miss the point, Harry. I don't question your cleverness. It's your integrity."

So, up off the knees just bruised so painfully. I could crawl from here to Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, and back, after which judicious Dr. Willhunt would cheerfully step on my fingers.

"Why didn't you haul me up in front of the Dean in the first place?" Probing to see if he thinks he's got an airtight case.

"Because, Harry, I thought you might like to salvage something of your academic career. Your defection from the Education Department won't affect your studies in English."

To think that this ray of light and hope should come from the source of all crap. Sweet mysteries of life; you brace yourself for the firing squad—yes, I'll take the blindfold, please—and from the darkness somebody shoots off a firecracker and tickles you with a feather. Don't believe it. The bullets will come the minute you relax.

"I don't get your angle."

"Contrary to what you may believe, I'm not trying to ruin your life, Harry. I am simply determined to prevent you from getting a teaching credential. You would not fit in."

He means it. My solid earth shakes if he's not a double-dyed bastard, and he's not. In his heart he actually believes in this pointless horseshit he dispenses. How unutterably sad to imagine that all the dreary funny people lodged like driftwood in the labyrinth of Education Theory may be honest and deluded, not parasites and charlatans. Willhunt, I have wronged you.

"You win," said Harry. "I'll bring in all my class records. There's one term paper that will be late, with my permission. A Mr. Garcia."

Then he turned and walked out, his future a freshly erased blackboard.

He had no memory of driving downtown to the store; he could not have told what streets he traveled had his murder alibi depended on it. Nor were the continuous little problems of the Carnival able to engage his attention. There was a huge crowd for the noon sports guests, no doubt drawn by grapevine accounts of yesterday's show. Nothing succeeds like disaster. But today's interviews went quietly, and afterwards Harry took the principals to lunch and presented their gifts.

Sometime in mid-afternoon there was an alarm; an elevator was stuck between five and six. As he hurried to the scene Harry tried to get excited, tried to worry that the store had no insurance, tried to

imagine Gunnison surgically removing vital organs, but the image had no force. The store engineer got the elevator going in a few minutes, all the lucky passengers got free orchid leis (swapped for display space for a downtown travel agency), and it was time to check tomorrow's ad proofs.

He was still sitting at his scarred desk in the little cubicle some time later. The production manager must have taken the ads, for they were gone. He felt utterly out of touch with all things around him, encased in clear plastic like a souvenir of some famous tragedy. It was really all over, he kept telling himself. The little dream of the future, the dream he had never consciously built, but which had accumulated a fragment at a time—this dream was collapsing with a long soundless crash. Life had given him a hatred of disappointments, so he tried hard never to let his expectations take specific shape. But in spite of his carefulness, he was forced to realize now his whole view of the world rested—teetered—on the assumption that in just a few weeks this grinding misery would end, this hail of excrement would cease, and the sun would beam down on a scarred but still hopeful young teacher. Not riches, not fame, but a meaningful job with some few shreds of dignity awaited at the end of this ordeal.

No longer. The worst had happened, the catastrophe considered and dismissed so lightly at the outset. He had worried about taking this store promotion job because it might make him blow the credential. And it had done exactly that; by sending him to drink booze with golf reporters on the day of a test.

"I said, a thousand for your thoughts," said Linden, seemingly for the second time.

"Ess, aich, eye, tea," said Harry slowly.

"Put the thou on my credit card," said Linden. "I don't often carry large amounts of cash. Something troubling you?"

"Nothing I want to discuss."

"I'm not sure I want to work with you after all. Too moody. I may withdraw my high recommendation."

Harry forced his attention. "What?"

"You really don't listen, do you? I said: Sherwood Murvyn is happy. The Board of Directors is happy. Even Gunnison is happy. The Carnival is a big success!"

"Groovy."

Linden got out a cigarette and lit it, his manner changing to one of quiet condolence. "I'm dreadfully sorry your mother got run over by a steam roller this morning. I'll come back some other time."

Harry shook himself out of it, bummed a cigarette with a gesture, then talked around the match. "Forget it. She was an old lady anyhow. So what about the goddam Carnival?"

"You may get a good job out of it."

Squinting through the smoke, waving the match out. "Oh yeah?"

"Gunnison may take over as Merchandise Manager. I may get his job. You may get mine."

And what was it Linden made? Over twice as much as any beginning teacher. And this was just a start. Was this the happy ending the movies have made us expect after great tribulation? Where was that joyful music building in major chords toward climax?

"What about Grady?"

"He will quiver like a dog passing peach pits, no doubt," said Linden. "He may even quit. We'll hire somebody else."

"You wouldn't kid me about this?"

"Would I kid myself about a promotion? This is the inside scoop, Harry. It will happen. Unless we screw up."

Perish the thought. But still he couldn't hear that happy fadeout music, listen as he would. Maybe it was just too hard to switch dreams all in a day; maybe he'd grow to think of this as a great success. Good-bye the echoing dark auditorium where he was directing the senior class play. Parents would speak kindly to him afterward and the cast would give him an engraved tie clasp.

"That's great, Linden. I mean it."

"Now you're waking up. By God, when I'm ad manager and you're my assistant I won't tolerate this sleeping on the job!"

"Yes sir, I mean, no sir. Sir."

Linden laughed. He was really happy. He'd waited for this day, hoping, tightroping. "Let's go have a drink, celebrate."

Harry was surprised to see it was five after five. Where had the day gone since he closed Willhunt's door this morning?

"I'd like to, thanks. But I can't."

"You got a date? Bring her along."

"I've got to study. I've got my Master's oral tomorrow." The bloody

truth was out before he could bite down on it. He could see instantly Linden didn't like it.

"You still messing around with the idea of becoming a *school teacher*?"

"To be perfectly honest, I've about given that up. I don't seem suited to it. But I've gone this far toward the degree, I can't quit now. I may as well get it."

Linden was pacified. "Okay, go ahead. It'll be nice having an M.A. working for me. Boost my ego, since I'll never have one.

"I'll wear my diploma to work. If I get it. Which reminds me, I won't be here tomorrow morning. The oral's nine to twelve."

"Lucky I'm not your boss yet. I'd can you." Linden grinned and whacked him on the shoulder. "Good luck, man. I'll cover for you if Gunnison asks." And he was off to celebrate his victory.

O the first stroke that they gae him
They struck him off by the knee;
Then up bespake his sister's son:
'O the next'll gar him die!'

Ring. Pause. Ring. Pause. Ring. Give up, answer it.

"Hello."

"Hello, Harry." Jan.

"Oh, hi. I tried to call you yesterday. They said you must be at the libe. I left a message."

"I'm sorry. Whoever was on the switchboard must have gone off before I got back. What did you want?"

Good question. It stumped him for a moment. "Just to hear your voice, I guess. I was having a bad day at the office."

"Oh."

A silence. "Harry?"

"Yeah."

"What are you doing?"

"Reading Johnie Cock."

"What?"

"A fifteenth-century ballad named Johnie Cock. I'm reading it."

Pause. "Is it any good?"

For some reason, sweet Jan, you're stalling. Okay, so will I.

"It has to do with a young man who goes hunting with his hounds, slays a deer, drinks its blood, falls into a deep sleep amid his dogs, then is brutally attacked by his enemies, the Seven Forsters."

"The who?"

"The Seven Forsters. They seem to have an old grudge against Johnie for some reason."

"Does he get away?"

"No. He kills all but one, but he dies. A little bird flies home to tell his mother to come and fetch him away."

An uncomfortable quiet follows the synopsis.

"It sounds terrible."

"The author managed to remain anonymous."

Plunging in abruptly she said, "Harry, can I see you tonight?"

Oh, what a temptation. "I wish you could. Any other night of the year, honey."

"But it's important."

"Seeing you is always important. But I'm boning for my oral. I've got a thousand facts to learn by tomorrow morning."

Silence. A long one this time.

"Well, never mind, then."

"Let's make it tomorrow night." He waited but got no answer.

"Tomorrow night, then. Okay?" Silence. "Jan?"

"No, not tomorrow. Can't I see you, just for a little while?"

"Please, don't make me keep saying no. I've got to pass this oral or everything goes down the drain."

That blank flat nothingness on the wire is beyond mere silence. It must be the way the world sounds to a corpse.

He tried again: "Why can't it be tomorrow? I'll pick you up whenever you get off."

"It's not that. It's just . . ."

Some eerie note in her voice told him what it was. Abruptly he knew, beyond any doubt. She was pregnant. And they had been so careful, so damn careful always. Except, of course, that one time, that time just after her period, that absolutely safe, safe time. He hadn't meant to risk it even then, but you know how these things go, a tickle here, a nibble there, and first thing you know it's in and what a difference. I'm converted in an instant to the rhythm system. Next thing you know the phone is ringing.

During these seconds of dead quiet with the receiver pressed against the shell of his ear so hard it ached, it seemed he might hear in Jan's very breathing the first faint foetal heartbeat. He saw suddenly, for no reason, himself perched on a rock by the sea, the wind chilly against his skin, the shoulder strap of his cotton suit flapping against his skinny shoulder (how long ago that must have been when little boys wore swim suits like that) and the brown-flecked foam rode the ocean up around the base of the rock (why brown?) while he watched his parents (so long dead, scarcely remembered now) embrace each other and kiss, somewhat clumsily he thought, down behind the rocks where they assumed they were hidden. He had wondered then, clever child, if they were going to have another baby, and being selfish, hoped not. All our worst wishes are granted; what would he not give for a brother or sister now in this loneliness?

With the sense of returning from a very long journey he willed his breath and voice toward sound. Nothing happened. He coughed, cleared his throat.

"I think I know what you're going to say."

"Do you?"

"Go ahead, say it."

"I'd rather be able to tell you in person. To explain."

"There's not much that needs explaining, is there?"

"You might think so."

Impatient for the worst now: "Say it, Jan. Get it over with."

"All right. I'm not going to see you at all any more, Harry. Not at all, ever."

Hollow, sick, falling sensation. Voice booming in his own ears.

"Don't be silly. I'll see you through this. We'll work it out."

"There's nothing to work out. I've made up my mind."

"Jan, for Christ's sake—"

"Dick has asked me to marry him, and I've said yes."

Old wit don't fail me. Say something, do something and make it funny. Please, God, let me think something funny quick or I might actually faint. It's all black around the outside of my eyes, and all I can see is this little space of cracked plaster and repainted wood. She's talking again.

"We're getting married as soon as he graduates. In about two weeks."

How nice it would be if she were pregnant. By me.

"Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"Okay," he said. "Okay." He knew that made no sense, but it was the sound that came out of him. That big regular bump shaking him every few seconds was his heart, but the blackness was receding now, he could see most of the room. He'd get through it all right if he could keep out the thought of Dick the despicable dentist.

"I hated to tell you now, but . . ."

"I asked." Meant to say more, but the traitor voice began to shake.

"It came as a big surprise to me, too, Harry. I didn't know this was going to happen."

At least she hasn't said she's sorry. Damned if I'll stand for her being sorry for me. God damn bitch. Must cling to that saving anger. Healthy dose of rage to keep from bursting into tears.

"Well, good luck," he said, and hung up. What a great exit line. One of the truly original minds of this generation.

Married!

It just wouldn't do to think about it at all. That was certain.

Nor would it do to stare at the phone. Terrible danger of calling her back, pleading, whining. Never do. He wrapped the phone cord around his hand and pulled, hard, feeling stupidly melodramatic. God damn cheap movie gesture. Besides, it was hurting his hand and the cord wasn't letting go.

For some reason he didn't quite feel like finishing the ballad of Johnie Cock. No real narrative grip there. He flipped over a few pages and forced his eye to engage the print. John Donne. Mad cleric cocksman.

> If thou be'st born to strange sights,
> Things invisible to see,
> Ride ten thousand days and nights
> Till Age snow white hairs on thee;
> Thou, when thou return'st will tell me
> All strange wonders that befell thee
> And swear
> No where
> Lives a woman true and fair.

So what's new?

27

"In my humble opinion it's the best thing that could have happened to you, Harry," said Dr. Kasper.

"What!" he cried, bleeding internally for Jan.

"This business of dropping the Education courses. It's a fine thing! I don't know what brought you to your senses at this late date."

"Oh, that. Willhunt showed me the light."

They were walking down the dank underground hallway of the Liberal Arts building.The air was green, like inside the aquarium in the park. Harry felt he was plodding along the ocean floor, with no hope of ever reaching the surface. He took a deep breath and held it to keep the pressure from crushing him. Hadn't Max Woburn promised him he'd crack like an eggshell? Was this the day? Screw you, Max. There is no Freud.

Kasper was ebullient, cheerful, like a winning coach sending his star quarterback into action. "Now then listen to me, Harry. I know you're bound to be tense and nervous at this juncture. But you'll come through all right. Just remember to take your time, think the question through before you answer. Then lead from strength. Start with a couple of sound authorities. Then work through to your own opinions about the author or the period. But don't try to switch a question to fit what you know. If you simply don't know the answer, own up to it. The board will find something you do know. Above all, don't try to fake it. There's an expert in every period, and you're bound to get caught out."

My mind is a teacup overfilled with facts, the dark brew of English Literature swelling over the brim, held only by the feeble surface tension, the cup wobbling insecurely in the saucer, the saucer balanced on a long slender reed, the reed balanced on my nose. And if this kind-hearted well-meaning leaky gas jet doesn't stop fizzing good advice at me, the whole bloody business will come down in a crash of crockery and I won't know even my own name. I'll scratch and babble and hop about crying "Poor Tom's a-cold!"

"You look a bit white around the gills, Harry. Feeling all right?"

"Marvelous."

A high window framing a square of damp gray sky floated past them. The crash of a steel locker door drowned Kasper's opening words. "—sure you understand the importance. With the retirement of Dr. Littleby, chairmanship of the department will fall to Dr. Sachs next semester. You recall what I said about Dr. Sachs?"

"He likes *Paradise Regained.* I read it."

"Try not to look as though you have a spastic colon when you discuss it. Dr. Sachs is prepared to consider you brilliant. If you live up to expectations in this oral, the teaching fellowship is yours. I have his word." Kasper caught Harry's quick glance and smiled.

So it was still possible after all. A door had closed, but another one had opened.

"I'm grateful for your recommendation," said Harry, meaning it.

"The stipend is not a large one, but it should be adequate for a single man."

And I'm as single as you can get. Practically one-celled.

"Your teaching schedule here at the college would enable you to begin at once on the course work leading to your doctorate." Kasper raised a pudgy hand as Harry started to reply. "Now, now—we both know how you feel about that, but it's one of the facts of life. Forget it just now. One degree at a time." Slowing, turning toward a frosted glass door, another tank in the aquarium. "I must stop in here and see Dr. Hesselwhite. You have a few moments before we move on to the examining room."

"I guess I'll go to the can," said Harry.

"An excellent idea. Empty bladder, full mind."

Alone, lonesome and terrified in this square cave below a foggy city on a cold spring morning. Walk down the hall to the men's, a

bone clicking in my left ankle, audible reminder of mortality. An utter and perfect vacuum in the frontal lobes. Wouldn't know King Lear from Oliver Twist.

Pugh. Place stinks. Rather smell good honest pee than that perfumed disinfectant the blower washes over you. Stall door closed halfway down the line, a pair of suede shoes peeking from under brown gab slacks. Hurry and drain it before he lets fly. Chemist friend once told me the bad smell was minute molecules of airborn excrement attacking the dainty nose nerves. True enough, no doubt, but the smell was never so bad before I knew that. Let it go on the old cracked porcelain urinal. Somewhere a factory is turning out a hundred of these every day, and they last forever. Where do they all go? As he turned, tugging up the zipper, the stall door banged open.

Out stepped Nick Philbert, bright as a new penny. Clean shaven, neatly dressed, cool expression. Very tiny pupils.

"Hi, man. How's it going?"

Harry stared at him.

Nick was wary, puzzled. "What's bugging you?"

"You, for one thing. You miserable sonofabitch." But his anger was cold, a mere echo. He was trying to recreate yesterday's fury, but it was too long ago, too many events had eclipsed that old disaster. He started for the door, but Nick grabbed his sleeve.

"What the hell is it? What did I do?"

He really didn't know, Harry could see that. "You finked about that test. You got me thrown out. You screwed me out of my credential."

Nick's thin face was stricken. "No, man. No, not me."

"Something you said to Willhunt. He picked up on it."

Nick thought, eyes narrowing in concentration. He shook his head briefly. "I don't even remember. I was flipping."

"You don't act so crazy today."

A brief shrug. "Well, you know. I got straight."

"Good for you. Just do me the favor of staying way the hell away from me. Sane or nutty, just stay away. I've had enough."

He pulled loose from Nick and banged his way out the door. Half a dozen steps down the hall Nick pulled up alongside, juggling the fat book he carried from beneath one arm to the other, urgently talking at Harry, who refused to look at him.

"Man, can't you believe me? I didn't mean to get you loused up. It must be a mistake or something!"

"You told me you'd fink if I didn't help you connect."

"Aw, I was bluffing! I just had a real bad yen."

"That's what I figured. I was wrong."

"Who was it—Willhunt? Come on, we'll go see him right now. I'll tell him he's screwed up, he misunderstood me."

"He's got the exam paper, Nick."

They went up the stairs, feet clattering on the metal edges of the treads. Pushed through the glass doors onto the concrete slab of a porch, with Nick still scrambling along trying to find a way out. The air outside was wet and cold, heavy and luminous with fog. There was no place to go; no time save these few moments. Easy now. Don't blow. Nothing like a friendly chat with a junkie to collect the mind.

"How bad does this hang you up, man?"

"I don't know. I don't know what the hell is happening or what I'm going to do. Everything's coming apart. Why don't you play God and fix it all up nice and neat again?"

"I'm sort of off that kick. I couldn't quite hack it."

"Next time try a bigger dose."

Voices carried on the fog. A few students from the ending eight o'clock classes were pushing through the mists like cautious tugs. On an eager freshman treble came the words ". . . real far-out poetry and crazy jazz. Boy, it was a swinging session." Harry felt tired, sick, and old. Seven lean years ago his pre-beat ears had tingled to the jargon that now dribbled from the mouths of babes. He would buy a set of baggy tweeds, learn to suck a pipe, and do his doctor's thesis on Chaucer. Lips that lisped hipster would never touch his.

Lost in this memory of his future, this premonition of his past, he was unprepared for Nick suddenly turning to him and jamming that fat book into his hands. He almost dropped it, but clutched and hung on as Nick went down the steps two at a time, calling back:

"Later."

He was at the Y of the walkway between Liberal Arts and Physical Sciences before Harry spotted the other two, the ones too old to be students, too alert to be professors. Without seeming haste they overtook Nick, divided, surrounded him. There was the faintest hesi-

tation on his part as he was confronted, the itch of a leg to run, the message from the brain to stay, then with a great effort he threw himself into a casual stance and began to talk with them. Harry turned as quickly and unobtrusively as possible back into the building, checked through the glass door to be sure he was not observed, then found himself a corner of the momentarily deserted foyer. The book in his hands felt strangely light for its bulk.

Masterpieces of World Literature in Digest Form said the gold lettering across the spine. Harry flipped the cover back. Inside, the guts of Homer had been cleanly excised; gone was the heart of Shakespeare, the entrails of Maupassant and Faulkner. Not even clever Clifton Fadiman had escaped the razor blade; his preface was as hollowed as the work beneath. Nestled snugly in cotton, surrounded by the finest minds of all time, lay a junky kit; a fresh needle on a cheap plastic plunger, a tarnished teaspoon (the better to cook you with, my dear), and a small white envelope. Pressed, it felt grainy. Nick, you phony, you weren't moving your bowels—you were shooting for sanity. Climbing that old chemical stairway to paradise, normality. Your life gives me cold chills to think of it.

"Doing a bit of last-minute boning, I see," said hearty Dr. Hesselwhite, right on top of him. Harry slammed the book shut.

Dr. Kasper looked disappointed in Harry. Not at all a good image to create, this nervous cramming at the crucial instant.

"I, uh, was just glancing through this book a friend just returned to me," said Harry. "I'll drop it off at my locker and—"

"No time for that now," said Dr. Kasper gruffly. "Come along."

"But it'll only take a minute—"

"Dr. Sachs just phoned my office," said Dr. Hesselwhite. "He and the other board members are waiting. You'd better come with us."

He jammed the book up under his sweaty armpit and walked between them down the hall.

28

Dr. Sachs, that eminent Miltonian scholar and heir-presumptive to the department chairmanship, sat at the head of the long table. Harry sat at the foot of it. Ranged along each side were the solemn custodians of the various centuries, dwellers in enchanted palaces, royal courts, and historic theaters, making their brief appearance here in the present to challenge the right of this young seeker to immigrate into their hallowed country. There was Ramsgate, hale and hearty as Chaucer's Monk with his red face and black tonsure. Next came Dr. Kasper, exuding Jonsonian solidity, visually opposing his neatly ordered Age-of-Reason bulk to the pale, white-maned flamboyance of Hesselwhite, the Renaissance Man. And Dr. Spatley, his adolescent's face on the middle-aged rotund body, a pure case of the Victorian abdomen slowly eclipsing the Romantic brain.

But what's all this? It must be Dr. Lysander, seeker of ids and egos beneath the lush verbiage. But not a literary type, not on your iambic pentameter. Lean and voracious as a prize doberman. And —yes, there can be no doubt of it—his teeth have been honed with a file. Harry felt a premonitory shudder.

Dr. Sachs gave Harry a smile meant to be reassuring, then polished his glasses on a spotless white handkerchief, reminding Harry that his own was dirty. Warn the nose not to leak and disgrace us. Unclench the jaw. My body is so unhappy with me as a tenant; the food is bad and the hours are murder.

"Well, young man, we've been led to expect an interesting morning here. How do you feel?"

"Scared."

No one thought this bit of honesty amusing. Dr. Kasper frowned and Dr. Lysander showed his teeth. Harry fiddled with the book on his lap, slipped, and dropped it. In that instant of suspended eternity he listened for the clank of the spoon on the floor, the prolonged roll of the syringe. But all was quiet.

Dr. Spatley bent, retrieved the book and set it on the table between them, glancing at the title.

"Junk," he said.

Harry twitched. "I beg your pardon?"

Spatley wrinkled his pug nose as at a bad smell. "Digests! The curse of the modern age. They're like a dope that people take to prevent themselves from really reading! *Masterpieces of World Literature in Digest Form*—indeed."

Harry could see from the general reaction that he was off to a rocky start. "I agree," he said lamely. "The book was given to me by a friend who thought it might help me to review things quickly. It was not very useful."

"I should hope not," said Spatley.

Dr. Sachs cleared his throat, which did not need clearing. "By way of starting off, suppose you tell us what you know of Milton's prose work." A pursy smile. "I don't believe any of that has appeared in digest form."

Though God knows it could stand shortening, thought Harry. But he was glad to be off and running, through whatever gloomy swamp. He began with the published dispute between Milton and Salmasius over the execution of Charles I, including that exciting pamphlet, "A Confutation of the Animadversions upon a Defense of a Humble Remonstrance against a Treatise, entitled Of Reformation." Boring them all stiff, he noted with secret glee. He spoke of the obvious influences of Spenser, Fletcher, and Sylvester in the Miltonic prose, as well as the wealth of Greek and Latin borrowing. He had barely launched into that ever-popular defense of a free press, the "Areopagitica" when Sachs, feigning the pressure of time, reined him in.

"I am impressed," said Sachs dryly, "by the thoroughness of your

reading, at least in that one area. Perhaps I should have chosen a field in which you could display a greater depth of analysis." With this cue, he gave the nod to Hesselwhite, avidly waiting.

"Tell us," said Hesselwhite, "about the various levels of allegory in the *Faerie Queene*."

Harry told him.

Twenty minutes later, as Harry was correlating the trials of Gloriana, alias Glory, alias Elizabeth during the uprisings of the northern Catholic nobles, Hesselwhite flagged him down. It was clear they were all impressed. And equally clear, Harry felt with an ominous fear, that they all were very much against him—with the possible exception of Kasper, carefully studying the moons on his pudgy fingers. The phrase flashed through his mind: everybody hates a smartass. Perhaps even the Certified Smartasses.

The feeling grew in him as he answered Ramsgate's questions about the *Canterbury Tales,* the *Romaunt of the Rose,* and even those about the archaic and ignored "Treatise on the Astrolabe." There was a terrible sense of things going wrong, but he couldn't help it—he *knew* the answers and by the rules he was supposed to give them.

When it seemed to be Dr. Kasper's turn to propound the question, Kasper merely passed the nod to Lysander, who snapped up the opportunity.

"Who is your favorite contemporary author?" he asked. It was the very first question of opinion, not fact, and it startled Harry.

"Well . . . I suppose . . . Cummings, I guess, all things considered."

Lysander smiled like a detective who has just picked up a valuable clue at the scene of a murder. "And your favorite novelist?"

"I don't have one," said Harry.

"You prefer poets?" Lysander seemed to be insinuating something.

"Not necessarily. I've liked many contemporary novels, but no one author seems to dominate—"

"Name a few novels you think important."

Harry hardly knew where to start. "Well . . . Fitzgerald's *Gatsby,* for one. Faulkner's *Sound and Fury.* Nathaniel West's *Miss*—"

"Let's go back. Don't you like any of Fitzgerald's other books?"

"Not especially. I think none of them comes close to *Gatsby.* Everything he wrote before that aged very badly. It has that jazz-age mustiness about it, like a college humor magazine kept in an old trunk."

Lysander showed his teeth. "There is fairly general agreement, at least among scholars, that *Tender Is the Night* is Fitzgerald's major work, but I take it you disagree. Why?"

Harry was hesitant now, having to pick his way among fragmentary memories. "I enjoyed the early parts of *Tender Is the Night;* it seemed like a powerful book. But the longer it went on, the more its force dissipated. I hardly remember how it ends."

Lysander considered this gravely. "Do you use your clarity of memory as a test of a book's greatness?"

"No. But I can usually recall what a book is *about* if it's good."

"Come now,"said Lysander coaxingly, "can't you really remember what *Tender Is the Night* is about? Have you some block against it?"

"It concerns incest and insanity among other things," said Harry, abruptly feeling that he was on trial here in a wholly strange new way.

"Don't you feel that Fitzgerald's exploration of incest is the most incisive in modern literature?"

"I have no sisters," said Harry. "Nor a daughter. My mother died when I was quite young. Perhaps lack of opportunity limits my interest in the subject."

There was a faint reddish tinge beneath Lysander's deep tan. "Since you seem unable to discuss this book, perhaps you'd rather tell us what you found so interesting or important about *The Great Gatsby.*"

"The character of Gatsby, primarily. His very American illusion that wealth can buy the future—or buy back the past. And the handling of the narrative point of view is masterful. From the first page, you believe that Nick Carraway will be telling the truth."

"Ah," said Lysander, drawing the sound out slowly.

The sound stopped Harry more than an outright rebuff. Ah, what? He was aware of a lengthening silence in which they expected him to be speaking.

"And *does* Carraway tell the truth?" asked Lysander, prompting.

"Yes. So far as he knows it."

"Ah!"

What the hell was going on? He felt like a suspect in the dock, with the D.A. sewing up his conviction with innocent questions.

"So far as he knows it," said Lysander weightily.

"Yes. And as quickly as he finds it out. There's no trickery, no withholding for artificial suspense. We get Gatsby's whole story, beautifully complete."

"And Carraway's whole story?"

Harry was stumped. "It's not his book."

"Then why is it told from his point of view?"

"Because Gatsby has no self-insight. He can't be pursuing a hopeless dream and revealing that dream for what it is to the reader."

Lysander was gently shaking his head. "I think you miss the point. It is, in a most important way, Carraway's story. Why is he so attached to Gatsby, so fascinated by him?"

"Because Gatsby is a colorful, vital, mysterious person—and more than just a person, he's the personification of the myth that wealth and power are the primary end, that they enable you to buy back the life you've thrown away to get them."

Lysander was looking a bit impatient now. "Let me show it to you another way. What woman serves as Carraway's romantic interest in the book?"

Harry had to pause for a moment. "Jordan Baker, I think."

"Yes. An odd name, isn't it? Do you recall her physical traits?"

"Well . . . She was lean, I think. Athletic, in a way. She played golf. Their romance was never an important part of the book."

Lysander ignored the last sentence. "She played golf. A man's game. She was thin. Small-breasted. Hard, Fitzgerald says of her a number of times. In fact, she was altogether very boyish, wasn't she?"

"I didn't get that impression. Carraway found her attractive."

"Precisely. But not attractive enough for the romance to overshadow the primary repressed love—that of Carraway for Gatsby!"

Harry could only stare silently. It was like something you'd find written in a public toilet in a bad neighborhood. Nick Carraway is queer for Jay Gatsby.

Lysander was feigning disappointment in Harry. "Did you truly overlook the homosexual conflict that is the core of the novel?"

"Completely," said Harry.

Lysander shrugged and leaned back in his chair, the brilliant prosecutor handing over the damned criminal to a hopeless defense. Harry looked around the long table, hoping, almost praying, to find in some face a hint of the outrage which gripped him. But the faces were bland, noncommittal, perhaps here and there even slightly approving that this young smart aleck had been tripped up. The hard thought hit him that it was entirely possible no one here had read Fitzgerald, except himself and sex-mad Lysander. God knows Kasper wouldn't be caught dead reading anything out of the eighteenth century. A man picked his Age and stuck with it. If you were a Chaucer man you read Chaucer, then Robinson on Chaucer, then Skeat's emendations on Robinson's notes on Chaucer, and so on. You didn't muck around with modern trash. They were all old enough to have had their early degrees before *Gatsby* was an accredited classic, required reading. There was no way for them to know that Lysander was a raving maniac.

Kasper reluctantly took up the chore of rejuvenating the candidate. He tried to look as though he had never met Harry before, but his voice was kind. "Perhaps you can tell us a little about Doctor Samuel Johnson," he said. An easy, open invitation it was.

"Dr. Johnson was a great wit," said Harry. "One time he was attending a formal dinner at the home of the Duke of Northumberland with a large number of people present. One of the ladies at the table had the misfortune to fart audibly. In her confusion and embarrassment, she began scraping her shoe against the table leg to create the impression that had been the noise. But the great Dr. Johnson regarded her with scorn and said: 'We all understood you, Madam. You need not try to find a rhyme for it.' "

Dr. Spatley tittered outright, and Dr. Sachs had to cough to mask the explosion which burst from him. Dr. Kasper looked shocked, and Harry was properly aghast at what his own familiar voice had said.

After a suitably funereal pause, Kasper tried again. "Let us save Dr. Johnson's more learned work for the moment and consider Jonathan Swift. Do you discern a fundamental attitude beneath his various satires?"

Harry composed himself to deep thought. "It seems to me that Swift's attitude was summed up in *Gulliver's Travels* when Gulliver saves the Lilliputian king's palace from fire and earns the king's

wrath by pissing on the flames. Swift saw the absurdity of the knightly code, Death Before Dishonor. To avoid the holocaust, we must learn to swim with the tide, be it ever so yellow."

Ramsgate, Hesselwhite, and Kasper looked sternly disapproving. Dr. Spatley was tittering again, with his jaw clamped shut, so that a muffled *snk, snk, snk* sound kept emanating from his nose. Dr. Sachs rapped his knuckles sharply on the table, addressing Harry.

"There is a proper moment for levity, Mr. Bailly. And I suggest that this is not it!"

"I beg your pardon," said Harry. "I was momentarily carried away. Yet we cannot ignore the illustrious literary history of our lowly body functions. The mighty Chaucer uses the nether zephyr at the crucial moment of his Miller's Tale, when Absolon cries in the darkness, 'Speke, sweete bryd, I noot nat where thou art.' Then Nicolas anon let flee a fart, as great as it had been a thonder-dent, that with the strook he was almost yblent. . . . Yblent being the archaic form of the past participle, blinded."

Lysander snorted, as though this was just what he expected of someone who didn't even know Carraway was an unconscious raving gay.

Dr. Sachs rapped the table again. He took his glasses off, looked hard at Harry, then put them on and looked hard again. "I shall not tolerate the wasting of any more of this examining board's time," he said in cold reproach. "The Master's Degree is a serious matter, Mr. Bailly. You have a fine academic record in the department, and you have demonstrated some competence in this interview—up till now. A certain nervousness in the candidate is wholly understandable, and we have had hysterical reactions on a few occasions. Do you wish time to compose yourself before we go on?"

Harry took a deep breath. Another. "No, sir," he said.

"Very well. Your future is in your own hands at this moment."

True enough. Too true. Tight grip now, for life depends on it.

Dr. Spatley was blowing his nose, dislodging any stray snickers lodged around his deviated septum. He got the nod from Sachs. He wadded his handkerchief, glanced at Harry, barely succeeded in not smiling, then said: "What do you consider the most typical and most enduring form in English poetry?"

The sonnet, of course. Decent of Spatley to ask such a simple

question; paying me back for the good laugh he's had. So now to pull off a dramatic recovery all that's necessary is to trace the English sonnet from Wyatt and Surrey (with a special mention of *Tottel's Miscellany* in 1557) up through Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, Cowper, Wordsworth, Mrs. Browning, Keats, and so on to the sainted Gerard Manley Hopkins, who preferred the unique rhyme scheme a,b,b,a; a,b,b,a; c,c,d; c,c,d to the typically "English" scheme a,b,a,b; c,d,c,d; e,f,e,f; g,g. I can quote sonnets till the cows come home.

Around the table there was a tensely expectant silence. His examiners seemed to have that upturned look of foolish spectators watching a man poised on a window ledge.

"The limerick," said Harry, "is without doubt the greatest and most enduring of English verse forms. Though erroneously supposed to owe its derivation to the noble jingle "Hickory, Dickory, Dock," published in 1744, the limerick was actually originated by none other than Shakespeare himself in 1597, when he stood in his favorite tavern and recited:

A young bawd in a brothel did waken
To find all her sex organs achin'.
She thought it Will's doing,
But all that rough screwing
Was authored by Sir Francis Bacon.

"Mister Bailly! Stop this farce!" grated Dr. Sachs.

"From this inspired beginning the limerick evolved slowly downward toward its present level," said Harry. "By the eighteenth century it had reached this point:

Blind Milton left God in the skies
To leap on his wife by surprise;
He said, "Dear, I can't see it,
So if you'll just pee, it
Will help me to find Paradise."

Dr. Sachs stood up, his chair skidding back noisily. "This Board of Examiners is adjourned!" he said.

Dr. Lysander showed his teeth at Harry. He was sorry not to be

able to explore the onanistic fetishes of Joyce or Hemingway's leanings toward bestiality, but it was a victory, nevertheless.

"Dr. Lysander," said Harry, "you look to me like an anal invert who practices auto-fellatio."

Lysander merely smirked. There was a dignified rush for the door, a fleeing toward centuries hallowed by death. In a moment Harry was alone with Kasper, who sat with his short, pudgy arms outstretched on the table before him in a curiously helpless attitude. Large freckles dotted the backs of his hands.

"Why?" he said softly. He gazed at Harry.

"I don't really know. It wasn't planned. It just happened." Harry was truly sorry for Kasper, whom he had disgraced. Now, too late, he felt the heavy obligation of the protégé.

". . . to throw it all away like that," moaned Kasper.

"I'm just not one of you," said Harry.

"You could be. You could have been."

Awareness of sunlight on green leaves outside the window, the sensation of waking to a different world.

"I was okay until Lysander started pouring out that bullshit," said Harry quietly, like an amnesiac reconstructing his trail.

Kasper glared. "Are you a child, a blubbering infant, that you can't ignore one poor misguided idiot among a group of genuine scholars?" Kasper was bitterly disappointed.

"It wasn't just Lysander. He set me off, but it was all of you." Harry stopped, feeling for words.

"That's right, shift the blame!"

"There's no blame," said Harry. "It just turns out that I'm not a scholar, I can't see things your way. What gets me excited about great writing is that it's alive. There are things in it that are true, then, now, and forever. Chaucer is great because the people in *Canterbury Tales* are alive, walking around among us. When we know them, we know ourselves a little better."

"Literature is not merely a road map for coping with our little problems," said Kasper. "There is such a thing as art, and form, and beauty—absolutes in the realm of intellect."

"That's where you Ph.D.'s lose me. I'll go on reading all my life, but I want what I read to make me feel and act and grow. But you scholars think literature is a nicely preserved corpse, and you each

have your own little peephole into the coffin. Seems to me like an awful limited kick."

This was gibberish to Kasper, who arose wearily, turned and shuffled out the door without any further word of parting. Harry picked up the hollow book and shoved it under his arm. He thought of the spoon and needle nestled in their cotton, thought of the white powder pregnant with magic. Some doors close, other doors beckon.

Outside, the fog was lifting, dissolving. Through the patchy sunlight girls in bright dresses walked on smooth young legs. They were eternally fair and youthful; their faces, their bodies would be seen here next year, every year, forever. But he was aging. Today, in a very real sense, he had graduated. The college was already an alien place. He couldn't leave it soon enough.

Driving through the concrete desolation of the city streets, he began to think: What have I done?

29

The crowded store looked very different to him, now that it was the home of his real work, his new career. It had been a stage set, a painted flat, but today he had opened both eyes and he saw it fully dimensional. It was thirty-four steps from the front doors to the elevators. While he waited he waved a hello to McCarty, the clerk in giftwares. One of the gang now.

In the elevator a small boy was licking one of those sample suckers being passed out in the children's department. It was large, striped red and white in a whirling pattern, and very sticky when he laid it against the back of Harry's hand.

Harry showered the hand under the hall water cooler and wiped it on his handkerchief as he walked into the office. Linden looked up from checking their daily ads. "Well, how'd it go?"

"What?"

"Your big test, man! How was it?"

"Oh. Fine."

Morton came out of his cubicle, grinning. "I hear congratulations are in order." He reached out and shook Harry's hand. "Nice work. By God, I wish I was smart."

Harry shrugged. "How's the Carnival?" he asked Linden.

"Smooth as a baby's ass. Big crowds all morning."

"Hell with the Carnival," said Morton. "How often does anybody around here get a Master's degree? How about me taking you to lunch to celebrate? I feel like seeing somebody drink!"

"Thanks, but I've got to chaperone the sports celebrities at lunch. Why don't you come along, Mort. Let the store pay the tab. You too, Linden."

"Sorry," said Linden. "I'm booked for a meeting."

"Who are the sports stars?" asked Morton.

"Hell, I don't know. Does it matter?"

"As long as it's not golfers. After thirty years of listening to Sherwood Murvyn, I'll be God damned if I'm going to sit through one more sand trap or one more wedge shot or one more—"

It was golfers. Over lunch they replayed the last eighteen holes of a recent invitational tournament, paying little or no attention to Fox's efforts to join the conversation. Morton stared at Harry's drink, a double martini.

"Mmmm, that looks good."

Harry lifted it carefully and took a long pull. "Adequate."

"Would you mind drinking a little faster? Watching gets a bit tedious if the pace slows down."

"Sorry. Decorum at all costs."

"—so on the fourteenth, you know, there at the dog-leg, I hooked slightly and got into the edge of the rough. Well, I could play it safe and use a shot to get back on the fairway, or I could try to blast one over the trees. So I took a seven iron—"

Abruptly Morton leaned across, picked up Harry's drink, and downed what was left of it, all in a gulp. He exhaled slowly, savoring the taste long absent but never forgotten. His nostrils twitched once, twice. "I think I might have just one of those, all to myself."

"Think you better? I mean . . ."

Morton gave Harry a rather hard look. "One. How can that hurt? You my nursemaid or something?"

Harry quit protesting because actually he was curious to see how Morton reacted to the booze. They each ordered a double when the golf pros and Fox ordered steak sandwiches and coffee.

The pros, Aronson and Moabley, surrounded them with tree-lined fairways and rolling greens as they sipped the drinks. Harry felt that inward ease conferred by the second martini. For the first time today the world seemed to be slowing down, coming into focus, making sense. Morton wore the rapt expression of a man revisiting the scene of an early, fateful love. When the waiter brought the food, it

seemed the most natural thing in the world to order another double. When the golfers and Fox finished their steak sandwiches, Harry and Morton were emptying their glasses.

"Aren't you guys going to eat something?" asked Fox, eyeing them warily. He knew Morton had been on the wagon for years.

"Eating is for children," said Morton.

Aronson, one down, was fighting for place money. "So in that trap off the eighteenth my ball dropped right into a big deep heelprint some clown had made. I didn't know whether to use a wedge or a shovel! It was about forty yards to the green, so I dug out my blaster and made a couple of practice swings—"

Morton belched gently. "Why didn't you kick it out with your foot?"

Aronson turned slowly to stare at him. "Look, fella, this was a *tournament.*"

"You mean there was somebody watching?"

Aronson puckered his lips. "No, as it happened, nobody was watching. The weather was bad and the gallery was thin. Most of them were—"

"Don't apologize. I don't care if nobody watches you. But if you were alone, why not kick it out where you could hit it?"

"Look, you just can't *do* that sort of thing."

"Ah, the caddy. Couldn't you bribe him?"

Aronson waved an arm in disgust and flopped back in his chair. Fox said quickly, "I think you're pulling our leg, Mort."

Morton rubbed an eyelid in a slow circular motion with his finger, deeply enjoying the experience. "It's just such a useless goddam way to make a living," he said. "Whaling away at the turf, shoving a little ball around. What good is it?"

Moabley, who had fought this same thought on nights his nervous stomach kept him awake, was stung. "What do *you* do?"

"I draw little pictures of people wearing clothes," said Morton. The idea tickled him; he began to giggle. He kept on giggling, almost soundlessly, but with increasingly thorough enjoyment. "We're all such assholes" he got out with a breath, then was seized again.

Fox stood up, and the golfers quickly followed his lead. "Thanks a lot for appearing today. The crowd loved it, especially the demonstration on the grip and the swing."

Harry got out two genuine pigskin wallets in gift containers and handed them over. "Stylewise Incorporated thanks you," he intoned. "Here's a little gift 'cause we're too cheap to pay money."

Fox and the pros wound their way toward the door, glancing back briefly and exchanging guarded comments about Harry and Morton, slumped over the table in helpless laughter.

Over the next double, absolutely the last, a sense of responsibility began to weigh on Harry.

"I'm afraid this is all my fault."

"What is?" asked Morton. He was having some trouble getting the match flame to meet the end of his cigarette.

"You getting juiced."

"Don't worry about me. I feel fiiiiiiine."

"Maybe we should eat something?"

"Go ahead. I'll wait. Maybe have a little drink to kill the time."

Harry looked at his watch. "On second thought, we'd better get back to the store."

"Screw the store. They won't can me, not after all these years. And you're almost through there anyhow."

"Just starting."

Morton's cigarette ash fell off into his glass. He stared at it for a second, then drank it off with the satisfied air of a man finding a brilliant solution to a bad problem. Then he frowned at Harry. "Whatta you mean? You're not gonna waste any more time in that dump, are you? You can teach."

Harry slowly shook his head. "I blew it."

Unbelieving: "No."

"Yeah. Blew it. Credential and degree both. How about that?"

"But—" Morton paused. "How? On purpose?"

"Not exactly. I mean, no purpose that I planned in advance." Harry struggled for words. "Look, have you ever noticed that what you decide to do and what you do aren't the same?"

Morton swallowed the last of his drink, ran his tongue around inside the glass, and licked his lips. "Yaas, if I look real close I sometimes notice that."

One of those lovely, ephemeral, alcohol insights swept over Harry. "All my life I've been figuring things out and deciding logically what to do." The bright vision fluttered, grew hazy, then took form with brilliant clarity. "You can't pass life like an exam," he said. Most pro-

found wisdom. Must remember those exact words and consider them tomorrow as already they don't make sense. "Shall we have just one more drink?"

"No," said Morton. "Not one more of these measly little drinks. Let's get closer to the real supply. A thirst is upon me."

At an immense cut-rate drug store a block from the restaurant they wandered among the varicolored bottles in the liquor section. Enough to keep a small city stoned for a week. Harry began to have qualms. "Listen, Mort, maybe this isn't such a hot idea, taking a bottle back to the store."

"One bottle, no. Too bulky. Obvious." Morton selected four half-pints of vodka. "Always use the handy pocket size in cases like this. Costs more, but worth it. Secrecy comes dear."

Confidence ebbed, flowed. Sail with the tide. "Okay. But I'll have to cool it. My golden future lies with the store now."

"Trust me. Observe and learn. Follow the old master."

Walking through the ad offices back to Morton's cubicle with that ramrod dignity only slightly more obvious than a stagger. Nobody watching but Grady. Let him watch. Joke's on him. Can hardly wait to see the look on his face when the promotions are read off. Now, now, be charitable, emulate the Christ, do good to your enemies. Oh, I will, I'll hold the window open for him to jump.

Morton slit the seal with a blade from his work tray, unscrewed the cap of a half-pint and threw it in the wastebasket. Done with that. He extended the small flat bottle toward Harry first.

"No thanks, I've had enough for now."

Morton tipped up the bottle. Bubbles wobbled upward through the clear fluid, the level dropped. Dropped! There was perhaps a third of it left when he lowered the bottle, exhaled calmly with satisfaction, and handed it to Harry. Harry drank. Waste not, want not.

"I've got to pick up some sport shirts from the buyer for a new ad," said Morton, taking the bottle back.

"Can you draw?"

"Fastest in the old west." He finished the bottle with an easy gulp. "Unless I can find it already in my scrapbook. Want to come along, see the funny people?"

Scrapbook. Book. Where had he left it? "No thanks, I've got a little thing to do. Catch you later."

Grady was rattling out a block of copy, lit cigarette dangling from

his lip like the old demon reporter ripping the lid off the vice ring.

Harry flipped his desk drawers out, in. Bits of art-gum, old tooth-marked pencil, list of phone numbers without names. No book.

"Have you seen a fat book of mine around here? I think I brought it in. Black binding, gold letters. Huh?"

Grady finished his sentence, removed his cigarette using the cultivated coal-miner's grip, flipped the ash onto the floor, squinted at Harry through smoke, ran a tongue-tip meditatively around inside his left cheek *à la* Coop in *High Noon.*

"That's a beautiful routine. Good for eight weeks at the Palace. Now have you seen my goddam book?"

"What color was it?"

"Black, like I said. It didn't change. Title in gold."

"A big book? Thick, rather, not large."

"That's it."

"No."

"Grady, please. Forget for a moment that I'm a no-good rotten bastard whose guts you hate. Be big, rise above emotion. It's very important that I find that book. Did you see it? Do you know if I brought it in here?"

Mildly: "No, I said."

Could he have left it in the car? Car not locked, resting in the alley, just waiting for a parking ticket. Book on the seat, just asking the cop to look inside for owner's name. Losing my grip.

Down the stairs, through the crowd, into the alley. Not there. Or has the cop merely gone for the narco squad and the big iron wagon. Curb that wild imagination. Breathing hard, out of shape. Must cut my drinking down, to about a pint a day. That should do it. Get me through till cocktail hour, anyhow. Teach the heart and lungs not to complain, run back upstairs.

Swaying, dizzy from the run and the alky, he steadied himself against the desk. A fleeting memory of himself coming through the door with the book clamped under his arm. "Grady, I'm sure I brought that book in here. You must have seen it."

"Was it a library book?"

"Yes. Yes, it's overdue. I've got to get it back."

"Two cents a day break you?"

"Would you mind if I look through your desk?"

Grady leaned back, grinning. "Help yourself."

Then it's not there. Where in hell? Oh, what deep trouble.

"Did you know you're going to get fired?" asked Grady.

Traitor face let him see me shocked, wounded. Did he find the book, turn it in?

"What makes you think so?"

"Just a premonition. I seem to see it all in my mind. You'll go right down the drain with all those fish of yours. We'll all miss you around here. It's been such fun working with you."

Harry sat down, took an easy conversational tone. "Grady, if you were going to kill somebody, how would you go about it?"

Frowning: "That's not funny."

"Of course not. But how would you? Oh, I don't mean the actual killing, that's a cinch; it's doing away with the body that's the hard part. No body, no crime. But how to get rid of it?"

"What do you mean, the killing's a cinch."

"Oh that part never bothered me. So many ways, embarrassment of riches. And the flesh is no problem. It rots, it melts, little creatures eat it or carry it away. Neighborhood cats, even. But the bones are a hangup. Them dry bones, won't burn, won't rot, won't stay hid."

"You've got a twisted mind." And red bloodshot eyes, found Grady, looking briefly into them, then looking away.

"So many of us have these days. So many violent murders every year. Model citizens run amok. Let's see, I'd guess you weigh about one-sixty-five, you're not tall enough, but you're chunky. Thick. Your skeletal structure would weigh in at about twenty-four pounds, give or take. Disassembled, it could be mailed anywhere, of course. Or everywhere. Some here, some there. The longest bone is the femur. Yours looks well within postal regulation size."

Grady stood up. "You better go away for a long rest. As soon as you're fired. Which ought to be very soon now." Grady moved quickly to the door of the cubicle and out. Footsteps fading.

Lord God, I'm in trouble, I can't stand having my life wrecked twice in one day. Please. But he sounded so certain. And besides that, my girl is getting married. This sudden, bitter knowledge undid him, whanged his head down on the desk, and started him crying with clenched little-boy sobs, the kind wrenched through your choking throat by unbearable pain, adding disgrace to your lot.

Heavy feet across the ad office, Gunnison's harsh bellow: "Son of a bitch, where is everybody?" Crash of Linden's door banging back against the wall, a mumbled curse, then behold the living god-of-wrath in Harry's cubicle, facing him. Harry by then had his handkerchief up, busily blowing his nose, feigning sinus trouble.

"I should have known it! The whole goddam store being dismantled by a raving drunk, and you sit here picking your nose! I suppose when you finish that you plan to jack off a while! Damn you, get moving! You went to lunch with him, the way I hear it, so you can get hold of him now and sit on him till we get a straitjacket."

Harry jumped up. "Morton? Where is he?"

"Shit, if I knew that I'd be there, not here. Last I heard he was setting off fire extinguishers in the women's dressing rooms. Just before that he was goosing people in the elevator or throwing empty half-pints off the mezzanine. Get going and find him! He can't be too goddam hard to spot!"

Dear old buddy Morton, what I have done to you? Seem to have spent my life running up and down these stairs. Main floor looks all quiet, except for the clerk sweeping up broken glass from the case by the tie counter. Score one hit. And a goosed-looking lady shaking her finger at the floor manager. Morton gone but not quite forgotten. Moving fast up the down escalator, quick before somebody gets on; too late. Can't go around, have to go through them. Sorry, beg your pardon. I am not, same to you. Off on two, please. No evidence of Mort, just a few foam-flecked ladies in various states of hysteria. A hasty retreat through lingerie, no such thing as being too rushed for carnal thoughts.

Down the back fire escape and crash, right into Danzig, our faithful guide through hunting-and-camping. Danzig the wire-haired retriever.

"Hurry, come," said Danzig. "Is making water, all over basement."

"*Morton?*"

"No, no, no. Za fish pond. Splitting seam, it has. Hurry."

The avid anglers around the trout pool were all uncaring; what's a wet sole for the sake of those glistening rainbows? Wade in stuff deeper than this all the time, and not catch anything. Harry flopped down and crawled in under the boardwalk framework surrounding

the pool. Down here with the braces and spiders and the soft sound of splashing water. Sure enough, there's the seam, right down the middle where the water is deepest, the pressure highest. Not too bad yet, but the wrong shape for my thumb, were I to emulate the little Dutch boy. What's all this? Scars on the wood, a bent nail, a long sliver of broken board. And a big nothing where this crucial brace should be emulating the surrounding soil. High tensile strength and fine impact resistance, but a low warp coefficient—in the words of the plastic pool man. Needs support.

Down the drain with those fish of yours, whispered Grady's words in his ear. Oh joy, the junky book was really lost, then. This little leak in the dike will be brought under control in no time. I'll find the book and live to dance on Grady's tomb, twirling the gold watch I get for twenty years of devoted service to the firm.

Crawling out, motioning quickly to Danzig. "Where's all this water running to?"

"A big drain in za stockroom."

"Is it backing up yet?"

"A liddle bit. Most is going down."

"Okay, listen. I want you to get me a couple of those foam-rubber boat cushions. I'll jam those in the leaky seam, then you get hold of the house engineer and a carpenter while I phone the pool man."

"Yah. Ride a vay." Off went Danzig.

Yes, please, operator, an outside line and honest-to-God it's store business. I wouldn't try to slicker the firm out of a dime in this hour of crisis. Yes, store business, and hurry or your own little business will be immersed in cool cool water. With trout nosing about.

"Hello, let me speak to Mr. Fichtie, please. Yes, very important. I'm calling from Stylewise, where he put up that sample pool. We seem to have a small emergency developing here—"

Gunnison's heavy hand closed over his shoulder like a shark's bite and spun him around, throwing the phone out of his hand. Bet that made a bad noise on the other end.

"—miserable shithead! Didn't I give you a job to do? You're on the phone, and Morton's still demolishing the store! Come on!"

Rather run than be dragged, so run it is. Better not have him stand around here until the seepage dampens his socks and makes him start asking embarrassing questions, anyhow. Hope they get the

idea on the other end. That abrupt departure should tell them something.

On the sports mezzanine, or upper basement in staff parlance, there was great activity. Customers were scattering, clerks were improvising barricades, the air was thick with disregarded orders and startled cries. Then Harry saw him.

He was riding an English racing bicycle, his distinguished gray hair streaming in the wind of his own creation, head high, great nose drinking deep of the fresh breeze, back straight, arms gently flexed in the tradition of European cross-country racers. An altogether beautiful sight, this swift and delicate machine surmounted by a man growing old gracefully, sound mind in sound body, cheeks ruddy with exercise—a sight to grace any country highway. But mildly unnerving here in these crowded aisles, especially with the idiot clerks hurling up obstacles under mad Gunnison's orders.

"Banzai!" came Morton's exultant cry. He caromed off the side of an inflated rubber raft, zipped between two archery targets, narrowly missed a rack of skis marked for spring clearance, then swerved down a new aisle, pedaling briskly. Right toward them.

Time began to slow. Events stretched out in vivid clarity; God blessed all present by flicking the slow-motion switch, so that no one need miss an instant of this rare spectacle. There was even, it seemed to Harry, time to be grateful for these elongated seconds. Gunnison was doing a little dance, perhaps of ritual significance, some deeply buried racial incantation summoning power, but outwardly reminiscent of a small boy with an overfull bladder. Morton floated toward them, eyes lighting at recognition of Harry, one hand leaving the handlebars to bring forth from sportcoat pocket the much-diminished final half-pint.

With that sure instinct of the lout, the instinct which leads the ignorant to applaud in the pause before the soloist's cadenza, Gunnison reached out. His horny hand grasped the speeding handlebar. The front wheel twisted. Morton's eyes enlarged. Harry moved toward the iron mezzanine railing to cushion the spot where Morton's trajectory should bring him down.

Gunnison squealed as the right pedal dug into his shin. Poetic justice. Morton's legs unflexed of their own accord, springing him upward as Newton's law of inertial motion propelled him forward,

maintaining his uniform speed and direction despite the defection of his vehicle. Over the handlebars he went in free and effortless flight, shaming the sleekest bird. Man's instant of glory, how brief.

Harry was there at the point of impact. A moment of confusion as shoulders, arms, legs collided and crumpled. Morton's pedigreed Harris tweed mashing Harry's dacron-wool blend. Harry's left kidney mashing the railing. Force transmitted along the iron bar, wrenching at the mounting screws. Plaster cracking. Mangled noises of tortured metal and frail flesh as the bicycle clangs its spent force along the wrought-iron uprights and Gunnison hops on one foot. The railing springs, gives, holds. A final crash as the cycle topples harmlessly to the floor, then a deep peace, as of the forest primeval. Clerks and customers staring in awe.

Morton gathered himself to his knees and looked to Harry, who was clutching his kidney, face taut and green. But grievous concern for his friend had barely time to cross Morton's face before Gunnison's red knuckles erased all expression and substituted torsional distortion, twisting the jaw far out of line with the fine old wise eyes. It was a blow that would have knocked a sober man senseless; it irritated Morton. Men who have lugged dummies onto streetcars together in holy youth should be tolerant of each other's frailties in later years. Had he not forgiven Elwin his greed, his ambition, his cruelty, his utter desertion of human values to worship a corporate nonentity? And this was his reward, a smash in the teeth at a moment already rich in difficulties. Already on his knees, Morton fell forward and sank his offended teeth into Gunnison's calf.

Gunnison wailed and thrashed. His lashing arm caught Harry beneath the chin, across his Adam's apple, accomplishing the Herculean feat of making him forget his crushed internal organs. Freed of meddling intellect as thoroughly as any Zen archer, muscles moving in pure and immediate response, manifesting the Tao without beginning or end, Harry's head dipped, his legs lunged, he drove his skull like a cannon ball into Gunnison's solar plexus. Locked in mortal combat, like Greek heroes of bygone centuries, the three gladiators fell against the mezzanine railing. Already weakened, the lath within the plaster split. The plaster crumbled; the screws popped. The iron bar twisted, collapsed.

Every face was upturned. A crepe-skinned bookkeeper who had

spent every vacation for twenty-eight years pursuing the wily trout through inaccessible streams now gaped with the catch of his life flopping unnoticed at the end of his line. At the fringes of the crowd Danzig, the house engineer, and his carpenter likewise stared, enthralled.

Free fall is exhilarating. That split instant when heart lungs and stomach crowd the throat is soon over. Then one becomes the still point at the vortex of the moving universe, weightless, bodiless, cleansed of identity, restored to Nature.

Great was the splash. They hit as one, and the healing waters rose up around them to erase petty differences with a larger problem. But water is incompressible. It transmits force directly. The same immutable principle which makes possible the hydraulic jack now acted on the area surrounding the split seam. The tank divided. The braces splintered; the waters gushed forth in Biblical splendor. And in one of those freak accidents so dear to the heart of an editor whose story ends an inch shy of the column length, a twelve-inch rainbow trout was flung clear by the splash, sailed over a dozen heads and came to rest in the frying pan which hung above the mock coals of a camping display.

Time resumed its brisk march; indeed it sped to make up for those elongated seconds, to synchronize this scene with the undiminished haste of the outside world. Everything seemed to happen at once. The boardwalk collapsed. People, lumber, and fish washed down the aisles like old river-rats shooting the Colorado rapids. Camping and hunting merged with skin diving. Rank outsiders swam through doors labeled Employees Only. Established order tottered and crumbled.

Alone in the split halves of the pool, Morton, Harry, and Gunnison clambered to their feet. Gunnison turned on Harry, fists clenched, years of accumulated rage distilled into a single pure drop of hatred. His hand shot out and squeezed a stream of water from Harry's lapels. He savored the instant of anticipation.

"Since I lost my job here," said Harry, "there's nothing to stop me from kicking you right in the nuts. You may break my head open, but you'll never sing bass in the church choir again."

Gunnison let go of Harry's lapels. An executive has certain obliga-

tions not to stoop to violence. Especially with a maniac. He turned, yanked Morton upright by his collar and splashed across the pool, shoving Morton ahead of him. Morton moved with tired dignity, indrawn, like an old war hero whose hour is past. He gave a brief, fleeting wave over his shoulder, then left Harry alone in the massed eyes of the mezzanine watchers. Here and there people were extracting themselves from the debris of the flood.

"Next show at four P.M." announced Harry. Then he trudged through the water and up the stairs. People made way for him to pass.

The strange thing was, he no longer felt hollow. That deep-breathing reflex had left him, just at the moment he should have been gasping like an evicted trout. It was as Morton had said: a man who knows the worst that can happen to him is one up on fate. These thoughts slowly took shape as he tried on his new suit in the men's dressing room on the third floor. No reason he couldn't be a customer, even though he was no longer an employee. Let anyone try to stop him. The clerk had looked bug-eyed when he walked in dripping, but a sale is a commission, wet bills as good as dry. Money makes the world go round; don't ask questions, get the cash. And some dry underwear and new shirt from the next department if the gentleman asks. No, sir, I didn't even notice you were damp. Is it raining?

Then freshly shod in twenty-dollar loafers of gleaming black, resplendent from the knife-edge creases of tapered pants to the fashionable slimness of lapels and natural drape of powerful shoulders, he walked in to say goodbye to Linden. It was, to his surprise, an emotional moment. "Thanks," he said. "I really mean it. You did more for me than I can tell you."

"I'm sorry it worked out this way, Harry."

"We had some fun together here. I won't forget it."

"I wish I could have seen your big moment. I've had several accounts of it. You're already a legend."

"Not my intention."

Linden glanced around cautiously, then lowered his voice. "I don't think Gunnison will ever be the same. He acts like he's in shock."

"He's been through a lot."

"Yeah, but—he's changed. The old fire and brimstone is gone. When he canned Grady he didn't even shout."

Bells pealing in the distance. A golden sunset developing. A meadowlark dripping liquid notes onto apple blossoms. "Grady? Fired?"

"Hey, that's right, I guess you wouldn't know, You were—" for the first time Linden seemed to take in Harry's appearance.

"I was shopping. Moved by your deathless prose, I became the man in your ad. Tell me about Grady."

"Well, it was weird. Gunnison and Morton came sloshing in like a couple of corpses washed up by high tide. Only Morton was kind of giggling, in a quiet way. Gunnison just looked beat, almost like he might be human." Linden paused, recreating the scene in memory. "He shoved Morton into his cubicle then went into his office. About a second later he came out, looking for somebody to get him a towel. He walked into Grady's cubicle and found Grady bent over a dope outfit!"

"Incredible."

"Yeah. He had it in a hollow book, of all things. Boy, he really had me snowed. I never figured him for something like that."

"Junkies are secretive. So I've heard."

"Of course he screamed like an eagle. Yelled that it wasn't his, he found it—even tried to claim you hid it in his desk. He went on for quite a while, trying to pin it on you."

"Beating a dead horse, so to speak."

"Yeah. Gunnison didn't buy it. I think he'd have called the cops for Grady, but of course he didn't want the store involved in the scandal."

"The store has enough trouble for the moment."

"I suppose we'll have a few claims to settle. But nobody was really hurt in the big flood. We were lucky." Linden shrugged it off. "In the long run it might even help. It's publicity, and you know what they say."

"What happened with Grady?" Meaning what happened to the outfit.

"Gunnison just told him to get out. Didn't even lay a hand on him.

Just grabbed the book away from him and took it down to the incinerator. He's still down there, far as I know."

"Drying himself by the flames. A cheerful thought."

A momentary silence. "I wish I could have seen it," said Linden again. "How the hell did it start?"

"With golfers. How's Morton?"

"Sleeping it off. Wrapped in an old robe from display."

"Give him my best. I look forward to lunch and cocktails sometime."

Smiled. Shook hands. Turned and walked out of the ad office a free man, a whole man. With just the beginning of a nasty headache.

30

Nothing like a series of small disasters to put an edge on the world. Everything vivid, distinct, occupying real space in a real universe. Feeling dull, numbed? Try a shot of Disaster. Not the most convenient narcotic, but legal. And definitely non-habit-forming.

As often as he had waited for Jan on this corner, how little he had seen of it until this day. Above the tall doors, cut into the gray stone, MCMXXXIV, an inscription that must have been there prior to today, but never noticed. And the muted rainbow sheen on the bronze doors. A reflection of the fountain and the green grass of the square pasted into each glass panel, the square hurled aside by an earthquake as a man pushed through from the inside. The trio waiting for the elevator afraid to meet one another's eyes; conspirators in the deadly game of pretending to be on important business.

He let the two men and the woman board and disappear before he moved in and pushed the up button. Now it's my turn to look rushed and important. Make myself worthy of the free ride. Elevators bad magic. Rather be alone with my claustrophobia. Get stuck between floors, don't have to make small talk. Nor breathe others' effluvia. Never forget that time with Jake Summers in the Art Museum elevator, the freight job used for heavy sculptures because the fast one was out of order, crowded with art lovers moving upward about two feet per minute, and somebody cut a vicious one with three floors left to go. What price culture.

A bell binged, a light lit. Going down. True enough. The drinks

were wearing thin. He felt in danger of falling through a thin layer of support into some abyss of depression. Like to have a little booster, but this is a job requiring abstinence. Dealing with the truth is dangerous under best conditions.

He stepped aside for the small group to exit from the elevator. She was the last one out, and she would have walked right past him had he not raised his hand toward her sleeve. She stopped.

"Hello, Harry." Men shuffled, women clattered, all moving off. "I wasn't expecting you. That's a new suit, isn't it?"

"This old thing?" He tried to grin.

"It looks very nice."

His flippancy wilted. "Yes, it's new. Do you have some time to spare now? I mean—I was coming to see you." He looked down to wait through the silence, seeing the two of them standing upside down in the black marble floor. Count the seconds.

"Well, I was supposed to meet Betty to do some shopping," she said finally.

"She'll forgive you if you don't show. Please, I have to talk to you. The car's outside."

Her wide gray eyes looked at him directly, but she had no readable expression. Without saying anything, she turned and began to walk toward the door beside him.

He felt conscious of the shabbiness of the car and had to stop himself from apologizing for it. He had a momentary surge of anger toward her for making him feel so vulnerable. Relief takes odd forms; he was so grateful for her presence he wanted to punish her.

The car was moving through traffic before he realized he had planned no further than this. He'd been afraid to count on her coming with him. Now, what to do with her? Where in this godawful din can two people go to be alone for a moment? A bar, of course. No, no lousy cocktail lounge reeking of clandestine romances. Besides, I never touch the stuff. The wilds of the park? Sure, that would be nice on this cold blustery afternoon. Probably foggy out there, too. Same for the beach. Great place for a suicide pact on a day like this. Where, where?

He jammed on the brakes to avoid a halted line of traffic ahead, turned the wheel and went up a side street, gunning it in second. He was aware of her regarding him curiously from time to time, so he

drove with the concentration of a driver finishing the LeMans. Silence in the car reaching the bursting point. He looked out the window, saw the cathedral, and whipped into the white zone at the curb. Before she could ask him why, he hopped out, walked quickly around and opened the door for her.

They stood on the windy sidewalk at the foot of the broad stone steps. She was wearing the black caracul coat he liked, which blew open to show a glimpse of grey wool suit. "What's here?" she said.

"Just a place to talk. Come on in."

"I thought you never went to church."

"I go in churches when nobody else is around. It's nice then." She didn't move. He took her arm. "What safer place do you want?"

At first they seemed alone in the vaulting stillness, but as they crossed the apse they could see one of the faithful lighting a candle before an alcove shrine and another kneeling before the altar. Harry motioned toward a bench in the last aisle, and they sat down. Moving clouds muted then brightened the light from the huge rose window, so that colors glowed then faded in the air about them. Far in his hidden loft the organist began to practice the opening measures of a Bach fugue.

Jan looked at him, unblinking. "Well?"

"I love you."

The organist, discontented with his fingering, began again.

"You don't even know me."

"That's true, in a way. But I love you."

She looked away. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"I don't know. Lately I don't plan effects. Things just happen, and I'm part of it."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I didn't know. As soon as I found out, I had to tell you. It was owed to you, no matter how you take it. No matter what you say, no matter what you do, I love you." He gave a sigh of relief, like he had turned the whole problem over to her. He was shut of it.

The fugue was growing in strength and complexity. The air cleared. Reds and blues danced on the polished wood of the bench. Jan stared at him accusingly. "You arranged all this. This production."

He shook his head. "No, honest to God." That struck him as

funny, so he laughed. He felt so much better since he told her.

Bach was leading the organist into a series of tense and unresolved climbing figures, each one tailing off without the expected release, leaving an increasing residue of tightness in the chest. Crazy old Johann. In my next life I'll be an organist, just me and God and forty thousand decibels of Bach alone in our church. And for my hobby I'll play little things by Mozart on the French horn in my book-lined study.

She still wasn't saying anything when he ran out of ways to keep his mind busy. His heart took up a slow painful thumping as the true state of affairs seeped through his momentary euphoria. Nothing outside himself had changed.

"When do you plan to be married?" he said.

"I don't. I decided not to."

"*When?*"

"About an hour after I called you."

"Why didn't you tell me!" Grieved and angered.

She turned on him, jaw clenched. "What do I owe you? I never did want to marry Dick! I just wanted to get away from you!"

"You mean you made up the whole thing?"

"No. He asked me. I was going to tell him yes, but I didn't go through with it."

He began to be wild with hope, thinking he had her. "Why not?"

"None of your business."

"Say, that's clever. C'mon, you can tell me."

"All right. Because I didn't like going to bed with him."

Dear Bach, will you kindly get off that dissonant chord? My guts are all in knots. And I have severe trouble breathing, too.

Hopefully: "You mean he was no good?"

"He was fine. But when it was over—"

"Yes?"

She shrugged. "It was over. It meant nothing."

Flowers began to bloom amid the organ notes. His internal wounds seemed to bleed more slowly. His voice became less a hollow croak.

"With us it means something. I like lying in bed with you afterwards. Running my hand around your smiling belly-button."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "Damn you."

"If you're so intent on getting married, how about me?"

"No thanks."

The organist got hopelessly entangled in some sustained pedal notes held against some involuted high-level twiddling of the right hand, stopped, and began again.

"Okay," he said. "Then let's go to my place and go to bed anyhow, because now that I love you it's going to be better than ever. If I can hang onto you five more years I'll get you on common-law."

A cloud covered the sun; the air around them grew dense and murky. She gazed at him, frowning. "You act different."

"Mmmm."

"I mean it. You've changed."

"You noticed."

"How come? What happened?"

His lips opened. Closed. He thought. Finally he made a throwing-away movement, very brief, with his left hand.

She smiled. "You've really changed."

"A careful program of self-improvement. Daily exercises. Meditation. Cold baths."

"Liar." She looked quite happy. "What really happened?"

Try as he would, he could not say. All unaware, he had become such a different person from that sad chronic misfit of six months ago. He could find no words to describe the metamorphosis.

"I got older," he said.

"You seem younger."

"I finished school. Forever."

The organist was beginning to get a glimpse of what Bach had in mind. The piece was growing skyward like Jack's beanstalk. Finding himself within reach of this utterly lovely girl, Harry leaned over and kissed her. Familiar lips, so soft. Unique taste.

"Will you please marry me, or at least go to bed with me before I assault you here beneath the pews?"

"You don't want to get married."

"Of course not. No man does. But I don't want to lose you."

"What kind of life would we have?"

"Why ask me? I'm not in charge of the world."

"I mean, I suppose you'll be teaching?"

"No. I couldn't learn to walk on all fours."

"What do you mean?"

"Knowledge goes a-begging. Deception grows rich."

"You'll keep your advertising job?"

"I'm fired. Banished." He grinned to remember it. She looked more and more puzzled.

He took hold of her. "Tell me you'll marry me, or I'll pull your skirt up, right here in God's house."

He looked as though he might.

"Of course I'll marry you. Don't be so dense."

He laughed. "On the way out we'll steal the poor box and live happily ever after on the proceeds." He pulled her to her feet. Down the luminous red-blue air with the organist finally making it, splitting his skull on the fugue of fugues, us walking arm in arm with the organ pipes bursting, our moment of spiritual marriage, so magnificently corny, we should stop and light a candle to Dickens, patron saint of happy endings. So unhip these days, this crazy glow of joyous victory; so intellectually chic to embrace despair and futility. Fuck all you cynics.

"Really, what will you do?" she asked, already wifely.

"I may ride a unicycle on the high wire. I may become an apprentice Viking. Or I might be proclaimed the Bastard King of England. There are lots of things I can do. Lots of things."

Together out into the sunlight.

KEN KOLB

There is no truth to the rumor that Ken Kolb is the pen name of the clandestine writing team of Norman Mailer and William Buckley. Actually, Kolb is a brilliant and diffident introvert who lives with his original wife and three children in as much obscurity as he can find in the Sierra mountains of northern California. In the summer he fishes for trout and writes scripts for several famous television series. In the winter he counts his money and skis.

The man's life is a model of logic: Trained by the United States Navy as a radar technician, he decided to become a writer. Graduated with honors in English from the University of California, he was fired from his first job there. Fleeing to Europe, he discovered he was an incurable American. Having obtained a Master's degree and teaching credential, he succeeded in getting a job as a forest fire lookout. Winter snows having dimmed the fire prospects, he went to work as a copywriter and publicity man for a San Francisco retail clothing chain; faced with a major promotion, he quit. Now a television writer, he lives six hundred miles from Hollywood.

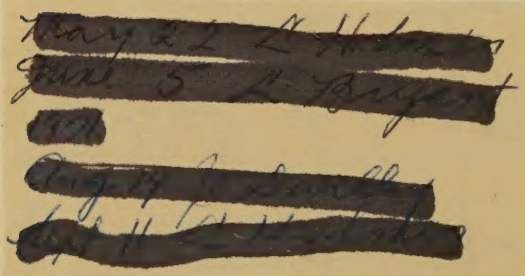
His clubs are Phi Beta Kappa, Mensa, and the local Elks Lodge, which reputedly has a good bar. His favorite writers are e e cummings and Terry Southern. His favorite game is playing chess with his children, when they let him win.

Kolb remains an enigma to even his closest friends, and the same goes double for them.

K81s copy 3
Kolb, Ken.
Getting straight.

WITHDRAWN

K81s copy 3
Kolb, Ken.
Getting straight. 4.95



NO RENEWALS!

PLEASE RETURN BOOK AND REQUEST AGAIN.

Continued from front flap

countryside selling peek-a-boo underwear to bawdy houses, the atheist who prays someone can argue him into belief, the addict who repents to the point of making himself into the lead character of the second coming, the artist who finds a new wife each week, the professor who fancies himself a reincarnation of Dr. Johnson, and the Negro singer who demands, in exchange for a lesson in love, a lesson in literature. And then there is Jan, Harry's girl. She's a great girl, but Harry is sure he really doesn't love her, that it's just a case of the relentless demon sex trying to take over his life. Then again, maybe it isn't. This too he must get straight.

Getting Straight abounds in deft caricature, wit, rudeness, explicitness. It is always on the move, and it is always about the relentless tempo of young American life. Sassy it may be, cynical it is not. Like all great comedies, it has its heroes and its villains, and our hero, Harry, triumphs in the end. Real values win out, and the novel emerges as a breathless, exhilarating, irreverently moral romp of nearly classic proportions.

Jacket design by Ted Bernstein

BOOKS-BY-MAIL
MAINE STATE LIBRARY
LMA BLDG. STATION #64
AUGUSTA, ME 04333

Chilton Books
A Division of Chilton Company
Publishers
Philadelphia and New York

There is no truth to the rumor that Ken Kolb is the pen name of the clandestine writing team of Norman Mailer and William Buckley. Actually, Kolb is a brilliant and diffident introvert who lives with his original wife and three children in as much obscurity as he can find in the Sierra mountains of northern California. In the summer he fishes for trout and writes scripts for several famous television series. In the winter he counts his money and skis.

The man's life is a model of logic: Trained by the United States Navy as a radar technician, he decided to become a writer. Graduated with honors in English from the University of California, he was fired from his first job there. Fleeing to Europe, he discovered he was an incurable American. Having obtained a Master's degree and teaching credential, he succeeded in getting a job as a forest fire lookout. Winter snows having dimmed the fire prospects, he went to work as a copywriter and publicity man for a San Francisco retail clothing chain; faced with a major promotion, he quit. Now a television writer, he lives six hundred miles from Hollywood.

His clubs are Phi Beta Kappa, Mensa, and the local Elks Lodge, which reputedly has a good bar. His favorite writers are e e cummings and Terry Southern. His favorite game is playing chess with his children, when they let him win.

Kolb remains an enigma to even his closest friends, and the same goes double for them.